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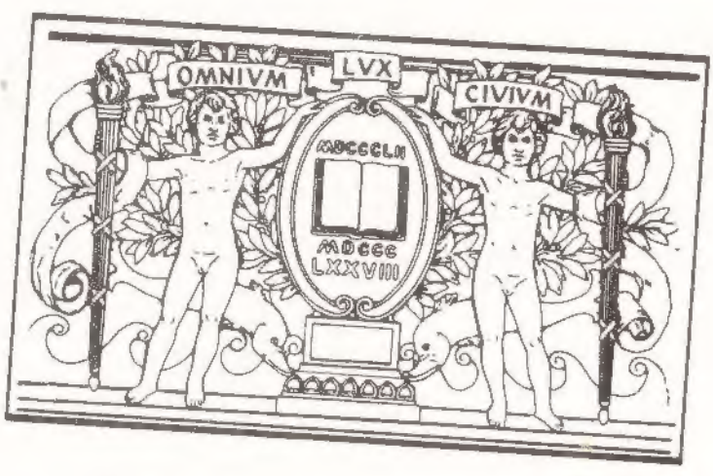

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THE ADVENTURES OF PAUL PRY

A DIME DETECTIVE™ BOOK

■

Erle Stanley Gardner

Series Consultant: Robert Weinberg

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THE ADVENTURES OF PAUL PRY

INTRODUCTION: Paul Pry

BY ROBERT WEINBERG

Whenever an article appears covering the great writers for the detective pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, the names of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler are always prominently mentioned. These two writers are always cited as being the most important and best-selling authors ever to make the jump from the cheap, pulp-paper magazines to the hardcover market. The influence and importance of this pair of mystery giants cannot be denied. However, neither man is the most popular writer to emerge from the pulp field. That honor belongs to Erle Stanley Gardner.

The reason most experts forget Gardner when dealing with the pulps is that he was one of the few pulp authors who did not use his successes in the pulps as a springboard for his hardcover career. Both Hammett and Chandler took early pulp stories and rewrote them into book form to help make their marks in the detective market. *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Dain Curse*, *Red Harvest*, *The Glass Key*, and *Blood Money* by Hammett were all rewrites of material that appeared in *Black Mask* magazine. Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell My Lovely* were both based on stories originally published in *Black Mask*. Gardner, on the other hand, completely ignored his pulp stories when he

started writing novels. While the first Perry Mason books featured fast-paced action in the pulp tradition, they were not based on older published material.

The incredible sales of all of Gardner's novels, with an estimated three hundred million copies of his books sold in the past fifty years, obscured his astonishing popularity as a pulp author. Not only was Gardner one of the most successful hardcover and paperback mystery writers of all time, he was also one of the most successful pulp writers ever. Incredibly prolific, Gardner wrote over five hundred stories for the pulp magazines, most of them novelette length or longer. He created several dozen characters, including Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook; Señor Lobo; Sidney Zoom; and Speed Dash, the Human Fly. His most popular character for the pulps, Lester Leith, appeared in sixty-four stories from 1929 through 1943. Gardner was the leading author in numerous pulps, including *Black Mask, Detective Fiction Weekly,* and *Dime Detective*. His name was always prominently featured on the cover and a new story by him was widely advertised throughout the magazine a month before publication.

Paul Pry appeared in twenty-seven pulp stories from 1930 through 1939. The series began in *Gang World* magazine and then moved to *Dime Detective* during the height of the latter magazine's popularity. As a side note to Gardner's amazing output for the pulps of that time, the same month the first Paul Pry story appeared, Gardner also had lead novelettes in *Detective Action, Argosy,* and *Detective Fiction Weekly.* During 1930, the year in which the first three Paul Pry stories were published, fifty-four other Gardner mystery and adventure stories were printed in the pulp magazines.

The Paul Pry stories were typical Gardner pulp prose. The lead character was an urbane man-about-town who lived by his quick wits. He was defined by a few short lines of description and had only a trace of personality. In keeping with the pulps, Gardner gave Paul Pry a trace of individuality through his hobby (collecting and playing unusual drums), his weapon (a sword cane) and his assistant (Mugs Magoo.) Little effort was ever made to create realistic characters or settings. The plot was the thing and plot dominated the Paul Pry stories.

Like many other Gardner heroes of the time, Paul Pry lived off

the ill-gotten gains of gangsters. Lester Leith was a slick operator who robbed crooks of their ill-gotten gains. A variation on that character, Paul Pry rescued the loot from crooks and turned in the booty for rewards. In the earliest stories of the series, Pry began working only after a crime had taken place. Later stories saw him following criminal schemes from the beginning and interfering just at the right moment.

Over the years, the Paul Pry stories changed and grew, as Gardner became a master of his craft. The earliest stories included little action and usually featured Pry solving an unusual criminal scheme and tricking the crooks. In later stories, Pry was transformed into a tough, debonair crime-buster who hijacked criminal loot in daring, deadly exploits. Both types of stories are included in this first-ever collection of Paul Pry stories.

When Erle Stanley Gardner made the transition from pulps to hardcovers, he never looked back. Later in life, he refused again and again when publishers wanted to collect his pulp work. He wanted to be judged on his new writing, not on stories done many years before. Only a few collections of his detective short stories ever made it to print. This *Dime Detective* collection of Gardner stories reprints some of his rarest stories.

October 1988

The Crime Juggler

"Big Front" Gilvray had one of the sweetest rackets in the world cinched—until Paul Pry picked "Mugs" Magoo out of the gutter. Then was formed a strange partnership that made the big shots of the underworld look like a bunch of saps.

To the casual observer, Paul Pry was merely a well-dressed young man, idling away a few minutes between spells of greater idleness. The faultless clothes, the highly polished cane, the air of utter boredom with the world in general, all proclaimed him for what the casual observer would have said he was.

A more careful observer would have noticed that the eyes held a steely glitter; that the snapping rhythm of the flexible wrist as it swung the polished cane indicated a trained fencer; that he was watching the passing crowd with swift interest.

But only a mind-reader could have told that there was any connection between Paul Pry and the huddled figure which crouched at the side of the curb, one empty sleeve dangling in wrinkled dejection, one gnarled hand holding out a hat, in which were several pencils and a collection of small coins.

An expensively gowned woman, slightly inclined to fullness under the chin, paused impressively, fumbled at her purse, dropped a coin. The huddled figure mumbled a thanks, flashed a furtive glance at Paul Pry, then lowered his eyes.

The woman passed on. The figure raised its glassy eyes once more to the hurrying throngs that poured past the corner. Those eyes swept faces with expressionless speed. They were big eyes, unwinking eyes, moist eyes—and they never forgot a face. For the huddled figure was that of "Mugs" Magoo.

He had received his nickname from his uncanny ability to recall faces. An accident had deprived him of his right arm at the shoulder. A political shake-up had swept him from the detective force of a large city. Unemployment and booze had done the rest.

Then he had been picked from the gutter by Paul Pry, and one of the most unique partnerships organized which had ever existed for the bewilderment of police and crooks alike.

For Paul Pry lived by his wits. And none but Paul Pry knew how he lived. Even Mugs Magoo didn't always know how his employer used the information which he relayed to him by a complicated series of signals.

A well-tailored man with undershot jaw and derby hat walked past. There was a swagger to his shoulders, a swing to his stride, an air of conscious power which clung to him.

Mugs Magoo swept glassy eyes over the man's face, raised the hand which contained the pencil-filled hat and swept it in a half circle.

By that signal Paul Pry knew that the man was a gunman for a gang. A twitch of the cane informed Mugs that Paul wasn't interested in gunmen just then.

A taxicab swung to the curb. The man who elbowed his way from the door and held out a pudgy, well-cared-for hand to the driver, with an exactly counted assortment of small coins, was the type one would have picked as a prosperous banker, a senator or a corporation lawyer.

Mugs Magoo dipped the hat sharply, a signal that the man was a big shot. The hat moved in and out, then Mugs Magoo bowed his head twice.

Paul Pry regarded the impressive individual with renewed interest. Mugs Magoo's signals meant that the man was the brains of a gang, that he handled everything from confidence games to gem robberies, and that he was too slick for the police to pin anything on.

And Mugs Magoo never made a mistake. It was his sole

function to know the gang world from A to Z, and Mugs Magoo never forgot.

Paul Pry raised a hand to his hat, carefully adjusted it, gave one final flip to the cane and sauntered to the curb.

And Mugs Magoo, holding his hat between his knees, scooped the remaining pencils into a bundle, pocketed the coins, donned the hat, and arose to his feet. Paul Pry's signals meant that he was interested, and Mugs Magoo's duties for the day were over.

The distinguished-looking gentleman, who was a crook, stood upon the sidewalk and gazed about him. Beneath the heavy brows the impatient eyes showed keen as flashing rapiers. Paul Pry, intercepting that gaze, breathed a sigh of satisfaction. Here was a foeman worthy of his steel.

A girl rounded the corner, stood for a moment, then came within the field of those piercing eyes.

"Ah, Miss Montrose!"

She started at the sound of the voice, looked around her with the swiftly furtive glance of one who wishes to guard against being seen. Then, and only then, she smiled guardedly.

The big man elbowed her, bowed affably, took the girl's arm in his pudgy hand and guided her toward the door of a restaurant.

Paul Pry followed them after a few minutes.

They were seated at a corner table. The girl made futile motions with knife and fork while the big man, leaning half across the table, talked rapidly, forcefully. Once or twice he jabbed his finger at the girl, a forceful gesture of command.

The girl's eyes swept uneasily from her plate to the man before her, flickered around the room, came back to the plate again. At length she nodded.

At her nod the man settled back in his chair, lowered his eyes to his plate and attacked the food with that eager voracity which heavily fleshed men customarily display at meals.

The girl did not eat. Once or twice she asked a question. The man replied by brief grunts, a nod, or a swift shake of negation. He seemed to have wasted all the words he intended to.

Paul Pry ordered a sandwich, ate it, and sauntered to the street. Ten minutes later the man and girl emerged. Once more the man let his eyes bore into those of the girl while he talked rapidly, swift, finger-jabbing sentences of instruction.

The girl was impatient, nervous. She nodded half a dozen

times, made to move off, but the big man restrained her with a word, held her while he repeated some last minute instruction.

Then they separated, the man to a cab, the girl to mingle with the luncheon throngs.

Paul Pry elected to follow the girl.

She walked swiftly for a block, then entered a gift shop.

The making of the purchase consumed some time. It was a small incense burner, and the girl viewed it from different angles, turned it upside down, carried it to a better light, before finally opening her purse.

There followed some five minutes while the clerk was busy with wrappings, getting excelsior, a wooden box, heavy wrapping paper.

Quite evidently the girl was intending to have the incense burner shipped, and was particularly careful to insure against breakage. Twice she interrupted the packing process to make sure that it was being done to suit her.

At length she clasped the package under her arm and left the store.

Paul Pry, who had been standing idly before the show window of the gift store, had been an interested spectator. Now he followed the girl, swinging his cane the while, humming a little tune.

The girl walked two squares, came to a motor transfer office. Here a private line offered rapid service to shippers of merchandise. The line catered to suburban deliveries and ran a series of trucks in radiating lines from the metropolis.

The girl had lost the furtive look of haunted guilt which had characterized her as she talked with the pompous gentleman. Her actions now were definite, assured, the moves of one who is sure of herself.

So elaborately casual was she that Paul Pry, under the guise of asking information concerning a package, was able to press almost to her elbow as she stood at the counter.

The girl was shipping the incense burner. Pry was unable to get the name and address of the person to whom it was going, but he could see the bills of lading passed over to the girl, hear her light laugh, catch a glimpse of the inside of her purse as she took out

the silver coin which covered the transportation charges. That purse was crammed with bank notes.

From the transfer company the girl walked rapidly, consulting her watch from time to time, hurrying her steps with each glance at the dial.

Before the rotating striped sign of a barber shop she made a swift turn, flung open the door, walked into the shop. She was removing her hat as she went through the door. Her teeth flashed in a smile at the surly features of the man at the head chair. That individual glanced at the clock, and the surly look deepened.

The girl's smile was transferred to the other barbers as she walked down the mirrored length of the shop Then she vanished behind a green curtain.

Paul Pry turned on his heel, summoned a cab, and, within a space of ten minutes, was discharged before an apartment hotel.

It was Paul Pry's habit to find lodgings in the most thickly populated districts available. He liked crowds, liked to hear the restless pound of thousands of feet as they tapped over the cement sidewalks; liked to hear the constant blare of automobile horns as they fought traffic jams; liked the shrill of policemen's whistles as they guided the human herd.

Mugs Magoo was already in the apartment.

Paul removed his hat, took the stick, twisted it in a few swift passes, then grasped the handle in one hand, the body of the cane in the other.

There was a rasp of steel on metal, the glitter of a naked blade, well polished and cared for, perfectly balanced, tempered by workmen who made of their work a sacred rite.

The young man's wrist moved with a subtle strength which sent the blade glistening in a scintillating arc. Twice he thrust at an imaginary adversary. His feet tapped a swift tattoo upon the polished floor, and then the blade swung through an arc, hung poised for a moment, point held well back, and was slammed home in its sheath. The sword became a part of a most innocent-looking cane.

Mugs Magoo regarded the display with interest.

"You haven't done no fencing for a while, sir. That athletic club bout was postponed, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Mugs, unfortunately. But we'll get back into the game shortly. I just ran in for a minute. Tell me about the big fellow."

"Name's Gilvray. They call him 'Big Front' Gilvray in the underworld. You gotta hand it to that boy, sir. They can't pin nothin' on him, absolutely nothin', an' I ain't meanin' maybe. The dicks has him spotted for a long time. They get him tabbed, an' that's all the good it does 'em. What'd he do?"

"Had lunch with a manicurist, Mugs. Know her? Blonde, rather young, blue eyes, five feet three, a signet ring on the little finger of her left hand, a slight scar just below the left eye. Prefers blue as her color—blue bag, blue hat, blue belt. Her dress was tan today, but I have a hunch she wears blue clothes most of the time. Shoes had blue bows, and were sort of a tan and blue combination effect. She'd weigh around a hundred and twenty. Seemed to be afraid of being seen with Gilvray, and probably got a roll of bills from him. Was anxious to get away from him. Works in the Palace Barber Shop off Broadway, about three blocks from where you were stationed."

Mugs Magoo stroked his chin with the gnarled fingers of his remaining hand. His eyes squinted for a minute.

"Don't place her, chief, an' that's a fact. But I ain't worth a darn when it comes to tabbin' people that way. When I try to think of 'em I can't do nothin'. It's when I see 'em and don't try to think nothin' that they pop into my mind. I see a guy, an' right away I remember every time I ever see him, and I've heard about him, all his likes an' dislikes, how he goes about a job, an' whether he's mugged or not. But let me try to think of somebody or other, an' I ain't no good."

Pry nodded. "It's a gift," he said, as he drew up a chair and opened a closet door.

An assortment of drums hung from the wall of a spacious closet. There were big drums, small drums, middle-sized drums. There were ornate drums, plain drums, and ornamented Indian war drums.

He took down a black and tan drum of Indian workmanship, bordered with white rings, the top stretched with thongs.

"Navajo Indian, Mugs. Know anything about 'em?"

"Not me, sir."

"Wonderful people, make wonderful drums. This one they play in the rain dances. Listen to it, Mugs. There's a note to it that a civilized drum never gets. You can hear it just after the first

boom, before the noise quite dies to a rumble. It's a resonance that comes from the interior. It's made of a hollowed tree, hollowed in part by fire, and there's something savage about it."

Mugs shook his head.

"Not me, sir. You know me, I can't carry a tune; I can't tell one sort of music from another. I'm all eyes. When they made me, they stuck my memory right back of my eyes. For the rest I'm a wreck." He paused and looked anxiously toward Paul.

"Say, sir, can I have a little hooch now? I'm off for the day."

Paul nodded.

"Help yourself, Mugs. I've got to figure out why Big Front Gilvray should give a girl a big roll of bills to buy an incense burner and send it to some suburban town on the motor express."

Mugs heaved a sigh and went to a sideboard. Paul Pry took a padded stick and began to tap gently the ceremonial drum.

"Boom . . . boom . . . boom . . . boom! Slowly, methodically, rhythmically, he tapped forth soul-stirring, savage notes, notes that throbbed through the ears, pulsated in the blood. In the weird strain of the sounds there was the hint of campfires, of pounding feet that struck the desert floor in unison, of vague shapes that twisted past the light of the ceremonial fire in mad gyrations.

But Mugs Magoo was insensible to the influence of the taut hide and hollowed tree trunk. He poured himself a stiff drink, swallowed it at a gulp, poured another which he took back to his chair and sipped.

After a few moments Paul Pry returned the drum to its closet. He took out another, a little snare drum. Then he sat for several minutes, rolling out rat-a-tat-tat of muffled sound. His eyes were concentrated to mere slits of thought. The thin, nervous hands and fingers moved the drumsticks with just enough force to barely bring forth sound from the drum.

When Paul Pry concentrated upon a problem it was second nature with him to have a drum between his knees.

"Mugs," he said, almost dreamily, the words accompanied by the muffled rattle of the snare drum, "that girl was being paid to commit a crime."

"Uh-huh," said Mugs.

"Purchasing the incense burner was only a small part of that

crime. There was more to come. It was that second part which frightened the girl."

"Maybe," commented the one-armed man. "You can't tell about the twists these days. They get hard-boiled in the time it used to take 'em to warm up."

"She was feeling a little guilty when Gilvray talked with her." Rat-a-tat-tat—rumpty-tum-tum. "She agreed to do something she didn't want to do." Rat-a-tat-tatty-ta-tappety-tap.

Mugs Magoo contemplated the bottom of the whiskey glass.

"Well? Whatcha goin' to do about it? We can't make no money because a frail decides to do somethin' that she don't want to and gets slipped a roll of bills for it."

"On the contrary, Mugs," rappety-tap, "that's just where we can make our money." Rumpety-tump, rumpety-tump. "We're opportunists, Mugs, and we twist opportunities our way." Tatty-tat-tat—a-ratty tat-tat. "We juggle crimes for profit."

"Maybe, sir. You know the ins and outs. I give you the set-up—"

He broke off as Paul Pry's feet thumped to the floor.

"Of course!" said that individual. "She's a manicurist, and she's good looking, and she works in a certain shop and—Mugs, I was a fool for not seeing the play in the first place." And Paul Pry crossed to the closet in three swift strides, hung up the little snare drum, grinned at his companion and reached for his hat.

"If I'm not back in time for dinner, Mugs, get in touch with Big Front Gilvray and tell him my dinner's getting cold. Can you manage to reach him, do you think?"

"Sure, chief, sure. I know his hangout and the guys that make up his gang. But he's dangerous. He's a thinker, and he's got guts."

Pry picked up the sword cane.

"A certain element of danger, eh, Mugs?"

"You said it, sir."

"Ahhhh!"

And Paul Pry's sigh was the sigh an epicure gives when his nostrils catch the aroma of a perfectly cooked dish, the sigh that a trout fisherman gives when a black streak circles up to his fly.

"Mugs, be good, and don't get too drunk to get in touch with Gilvray if I'm not home."

The man regarded his employer with glassy-eyed dignity.

"Son," he said sadly, "there ain't enough hooch in the world to get me to a state where I don't crave more hooch. And I ain't forgettin' nothin'."

Paul Pry smiled, closed the door of his apartment, walked blithely to the street and sought out the Palace Barber Shop.

He found that the interior was plainly visible from the street. Then he went to a place where cars were rented without drivers, rented a snappy roadster, drove to the front of the barber shop, parked in a double line for ten minutes, then got a chance to ooze in to the curb. Twenty minutes later he had the parking place he wanted, directly in front of the window.

Miss Montrose was at her station, a little table where the light was good. From time to time she glanced at the clock. As the hands approached the hour of three o'clock she became more nervous, glanced at the clock with greater frequency.

Paul Pry, watching, tapped on the steering wheel with the tips of his sensitive fingers, and smiled.

At three-ten a young man walked into the shop, nodded pleasantly to the barbers, removed his coat and collar, stretched himself luxuriously in the front chair and nodded to the manicurist.

Paul Pry, watching closely, decided that the manicurist was the real reason the young man patronized the shop.

He had been careful to speak to the barbers first when he entered the shop. Not until after he had included them in a greeting, had he turned casually to the table where the girl sat with wide eyes, parted lips. Then his nod had been so studiedly impersonal as to seem strained.

After he had seated himself in the chair, he looked at his fingers for a moment, as though deciding whether or not he wanted a manicure. Then he had nodded to the girl and settled back.

But the girl, taking his hand, had given it a squeeze, and Paul Pry had seen the man's fingers tighten in an answering squeeze.

Paul Pry nodded, slowly, thoughtfully, as a theater-goer might nod when the second act of a show opens with precisely the situation he has anticipated from the close of the first act. There was satisfaction in his nod, also a wary watchfulness.

The girl didn't look at the clock any longer.

Paul Pry concentrated his attention upon the coat, collar and hat which decorated the tree in the barber shop.

The barber flung a hot towel over the face of the customer. The manicurist arose, walked to her table. Nervous hands fluttered over the little bowls. Then she turned, walked toward the hat tree, paused, glanced swiftly about her and darted a shapely hand to the side pocket of the coat.

Paul Pry, watching, whistled his surprise. Here was none of the nervous bungling of the amateur. Here was the deft swiftness of touch of a professional dip. Unquestionably the girl knew her business. Here was a moll who had reefed many a kick.

The leather wallet which came from the side pocket went under the towel which the girl carried over her arm. The girl dropped back to the little stool before the customer, took up his hand, plied nail file and orange stick with deft skill.

Once or twice she paused to search for some instrument or other, but she sat in plain sight, never leaving the room. Twice her hands dropped beneath the towel which reposed on her lap, and which towel must conceal the wallet which she had slipped from the coat pocket. But there was no fumbling, no hesitancy. The hands simply burrowed beneath the towel, were there for a second, then back in plain sight.

The left hand finished, the girl arose, set the stool on the other side of the chair, turned once more back to her table, and then, for the second time, there was a pause before the hat tree, the flash of a towel, the flicker of motion.

And none but the watching eyes of Paul Pry had seen the leather wallet slipped back into the coat pocket.

The barber finished with the shave. The man was propped upright in the chair. The girl put the finishing touches on the manicure. She was laughing, talking vivaciously. The customer regarded her with eyes which betrayed the secret he had been at such pains to conceal beneath a mask of casual unconcern when he had entered the place. There was no doubt but what he was mad about the girl.

The man donned hat and coat, exchanged a few words with the barbers, after the manner of a regular customer, gave the girl one burning, surreptitious glance, and left the shop.

Paul Pry swung away from the curb.

The man walked to the corner. Pry picked out a flivver,

carefully judged the distance, stepped on the throttle. There was the crash of an impact, the sound of a ripping fender, the roar of an irate driver's accusation, and then Paul Pry was out of his car, on the street, surveying the damage, making loud accusations of negligence on the part of the driver of the flivver.

To support his claims he dashed to the sidewalk, grabbed the freshly shaven and manicured individual by the coat and propelled him to the scene of the accident, where a small crowd was gathering.

"You saw it. You saw him cut in front of me!" Paul insisted.

The freshly shaven man was embarrassed.

"Why no. That is, I heard a noise, and I looked up and the cars were together. But I can tell you the position they were in right after the impact. The flivver was over here, and you were about here."

"Well, what does that show?" growled the other driver. "This guy runs into me. Huh, here comes the cop. He'll straighten it out in a hurry."

Paul extended his hand toward the witness he had summoned.

"Your card, and then you can beat it. No use arguing here on the street. If it comes to court I'll call you as a witness. If it doesn't, you won't be bothered. I'll pay 'em a reasonable sum for a settlement, but I don't want 'em to stick me. Give me your card and act like you're going to make a good witness."

The man nodded his comprehension, smiled his relief. The freshly manicured hand flipped into his inside coat pocket, came out with a wallet. From the wallet he took a card.

"R. C. Fenniman, Wholesale Jeweler," read Paul, and, down in the lower left-hand corner, "Presented by Samuel Bergen."

The address of the wholesale jewelry concern was only a matter of some four blocks from the scene of the accident. Paul Pry glanced swiftly at the card, nodded, turned to confront the officer who was plowing his way forward importantly.

"Come on, come on," he bellowed. "It ain't nothin' but a busted fender. What are you guys blockin' traffic for? Get those cars over to the curb. Lively now. On your way, you folks. Ain't you never seen a busted fender before?"

The flivver driver remonstrated.

"I wanted to leave 'em right where they were, so you could see

how this guy run into me. I was just turnin' the corner, an' I had my left arm out, an' I wasn't goin' over ten miles an hour— "

The officer snorted.

"All right, all right! I see. But there ain't no reason to tie up all this traffic. Get in, back away, move 'em over. That fender's off anyway. Might as well make a good job of it. Back up that roadster. Back it up! Back it up! Get started. That's it. Now pick up that fender. All right, you guys, come over here and let's see what it's all about. Now wait a second until I get this traffic straightened out. No left-land turns, now, mister. Just keep goin' until we get the corner cleared. That's it . . . No, ma'am . . . straight ahead. All right, you birds, now we can talk. Whose fault was it?"

Paul Pry spoke in a subdued voice.

"I guess it was mine, officer."

"That's the way. How much was the fender worth?"

"Well," opined the flivver driver, "the tire is cut and—"

"Forget it, forget it!" broke in the cop. "I'm gettin' you a settlement here. You got a battered fender that got torn off. It's an old wreck in the first place. How much do you want to settle?"

"Twenty dollars."

The cop snorted.

"I'll pay it," agreed Paul Pry, with suspicious alacrity.

"All right," said the officer. "That's up to you. The whole car ain't worth forty dollars."

But Paul Pry made no move toward his pocket.

"Well, come across," said the flivver driver.

Paul lowered his eyes.

"I haven't got it with me," he said, and his tone dripped consciousness of guilt.

"Yeah. I thought so," sneered the flivver driver.

"He's got a car," said the officer.

"Huh, a drive-yourself bus that he rented. The deposit he left will be taken for straightening his own fender," said the irate flivver owner.

"Tell you what," suggested Pry, "I've got a sister who works in a barber shop halfway down the block. She'll give me the money. You wait here with the cars, and the officer can come with me if you think I'm going to beat it. I'll be back with the twenty dollars inside of five minutes."

The man nodded, spat into the gutter.

"Suits me," he said, "provided the cop goes with you, an' stays with you."

"Come on, come on," said the officer. "We ain't got all day. I got work to do."

They started for the sidewalk.

"That's the place, the Palace Barber Shop," said Pry.

"Huh," snorted the man in uniform, "if you was to get yourself a job instead of wearing all the glad rags and sportin' a fancy stick, you might not have to make a touch on a frail whenever you smashed a car."

Paul Pry took the rebuke meekly.

"Yes, officer, I'll try; and would you mind waiting outside? I don't want to alarm sister, or cause the man that runs the place to think I'm making a scene. She's awfully nervous, sis is, and she'll think I'm in trouble. You can stand right up against the window where you can look in to the place and see I'm not making any getaway."

"All right, but make it snappy."

"I'll make it snappy. But you be sure and stand where sis can see you. Otherwise she might think I was just trying for a touch. I've already tried for a loan today, and she said nothing doing. I've got to let her know I'm in trouble of some sort—"

"All right, all right," growled the officer, "only I'd oughta run you in. Why don't you go to work, you big cake-eater? Makes me feel like a boob helpin' you get money out of a workin' girl. But that flivver driver's entitled to his money, an' if you get it, I don't know as I care how. Skip inside an' make it snappy."

Paul Pry opened the door. The barbers looked up. The girl at the manicurist's table looked up.

She saw Paul Pry turn for a last word with the officer. She saw the officer nod and take up his station directly in front of the plate-glass window. She saw the watchful frown at the corners of his squinted eyes, the belligerency of his attitude. The girl's hand went to her throat.

Paul Pry approached, bent over her.

"Sis," he said, "I've got no wish to make this painful."

The girl tried to speak, but words failed to emerge from her constricted throat. White to the lips, she stared in dumb terror.

"If you come clean there's a chance I can beat the rap for you,"

said Paul Pry, still bent over the girl. "But make it snappy and don't stall.

For one swift instant she contemplated defiance.

"What are you trying to do?" she flared, but she kept her voice low, so that the barbers might not hear the conversation.

"Tryin' to make it easy for you, sister," assured Paul Pry. "There's the harness bull outside. There's your record for reefing britches. There's Big Front Gilvray. There's Samuel Bergen, the poor sucker It's quite a case. Kick through and I'll let you off."

"Yes you will!"

"I mean it. Come across and I'll walk out. I'm after bigger stuff. You're a frail, and you got roped into this. Gilvray had to bulldoze you a bit to get you into it."

The girl nodded.

"I'll say he did. I got this job and I was going straight, when he nosed me out and put it up to me to turn this one trick. Said he'd spill the beans to my boss and to the cops if I didn't. You see, he got ahold of a guy I used to work with on these dip jobs, and believe me, when that boy talked he talked plenty. Gilvray knows enough to send me up—so I had to pull this one. Anyway, it looked like a cinch. Just had to play sweet to that Bergen for a while till I got what I wanted."

Paul Pry tossed Samuel Bergen's business card on the desk.

"Baby!" he said fervently, "I'm fallin'. I believe you. I suppose this guy thinks you're on the up and up, and I'm not going to spoil it for you. I won't tell him a single word of this."

She snorted.

"He's a married bozo that thinks his wife don't understand him. I only played him along because Big Front put it up to me cold turkey. I'm goin' to bounce him back so hard he'll stick."

The officer tapped on the glass.

They turned, saw his frowning face jerk in an impatient gesture toward the door.

"Hurry up!" whispered Paul Pry to the girl, "fork over what you took out of that wallet."

Her hand darted into the front of her dress, came out with a folded paper.

"What were you instructed to do with this paper?"

"Meet a guy with a pink carnation in his coat on the corner of

the Cody Building at five twenty-five sharp and turn it over to him. An', so help me, mister, that's all I know, except I got a wad of dough. I s'pose I gotta cough that up," and she reached for her purse.

Paul Pry shook his head.

"Nope, sister. The dough's yours. Forget all this. If anybody asks you questions, tell 'em to go to headquarters and they can get all the information they want. So long."

The officer opened the door.

"Say, are you goin'—"

Paul Pry grinned.

"Got what we came after, old top. So long, sister, be good till I see you again."

"Good and careful," said the girl, with emphasis.

Paul Pry took the officer's arm, thrust a crumpled twenty dollar bill into his palm.

"There you are, officer, that'll pay the damage. I got it just like I promised."

The officer jerked his arm away.

"I'd oughta run you in as a vag," he growled. "Livin' off'n your kid sister that way. Bah!"

They returned to the corner. The flivver driver received his money, the officer made his report. The crowd that had stood around in eager expectation of a fight sighed and dispersed. The cars were driven away. The corner became as usual.

Paul Pry unfolded the document he had received from the girl. It was an original and duplicate bill of lading of the "Interurban Motor Express Company," calling for the delivery of one package sent by Samuel Bergen to one Herbert Dangerfield at Midland.

Paul Pry chuckled. Things were shaping up now. He knew now why the girl had purchased the incense burner; he knew the reason for that fumbling under the towel. She must have slipped her receipt for the incense burner into Bergen's wallet to take the place of the one she stole from Bergen, which he now held in his hand.

Paul Pry jumped into his car, drove away. He stopped in front of the gift shop where the girl had selected the present of an incense burner and ordered it packed for shipping. He strolled in.

Paul Pry also selected an incense burner. He, too, expressed

some concern over the construction, wondered whether it would stand shipping, and gave instructions that it was to be packed so that a safe delivery could be guaranteed.

He personally supervised the packing, the wrapping, then paid for the article and left the store. He went at once to the Interurban Motor Express Company and shipped the parcel to Herbert Dangerfield at Midland, and he gave the name of the shipper as Samuel Bergen.

He pocketed the original and one copy of the bill of lading which had been given him, along with the one he had wheedled out of the manicurist. Then he strolled from the express office and contemplated the afternoon crowds which milled about the street. There was in his eye the calm tranquility of one who is at peace with the world, having performed a task well.

He got in his car, drove to the wholesale jewelry store of R. C. Fenniman.

"I wish to see Mr. Fenniman at once upon a matter of the most urgent importance," he told the girl at the wicketed window.

She shook her head.

"He said he didn't want to be disturbed this aft'noon. He's 'n conference."

Paul Pry smiled, a patronizing smile of self-assurance.

"Tell him that I am waiting to save him from a big loss and that he has just three minutes to make up his mind whether he wants to see me or not."

The girl nodded, vanished, impressed with something in Paul's manner.

And R. C. Fenniman had exactly two minutes and ten seconds to spare out of the three minute limit when the girl returned and nodded.

"Come this way."

She led the visitor past a row of showcases, past locked safes, past desks where men looked up curiously. A man gave an exclamation, got to his feet.

It was Samuel Bergen, freshly shaved and manicured.

"How'd you make out?"

Paul Pry grinned.

"Fine. Got a nice settlement, thanks to you. Had your card and

thought I'd drop in and see your boss—theft insurance, merchants' protection, that's my line."

Bergen recoiled and paled.

"For God's sake, don't tell him you came here because of me!"

Paul let his face lengthen.

"Gee, I thought that'd make a good opening."

"Lord, man! You don't know the boss," groaned Bergen.

"All right, old chap, all right," agreed Paul. "I won't say a word. If you should happen in the room while I'm there don't even let on that you ever saw me before. I'll stand back of you. You sure backed me up—All right, young lady, coming. Thought I knew this gentleman, but it's a mistake. He just reminded me of someone else I knew."

And Paul Pry turned to the left, went through the door the girl was holding open.

A glum individual with the folded, seamed face of a dyspeptic regarded Pry with dour appraisal.

"What do you want?"

Paul sat down, crossed his legs, gave some concern to the crease in his trousers, took a cigarette from his case, lit it, blew out a cloud of smoke, grinned.

"You're going to be robbed," he said.

The lean face twisted in some form of emotion. The red-rimmed eyes blinked. The lips twitched.

"Bah!" said the man, and the sour odor of his breath poisoned the air of the office, came in a nauseating wave to the nostrils of Paul Pry.

Pry shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm representing a new service to merchants. I can prevent certain crimes. There's a crime contemplated against your property, and I have the power to prevent that crime."

The sour individual gulped.

"Get out!"

"Come, come. Not so fast. How about a certain shipment you made earlier in the afternoon, a shipment to a chap by the name of Dangerfield? Rather valuable, wasn't it?"

The man scraped back his chair, got his feet in under him, uncoiled his thin length and glowered from red-rimmed eyes. Then his finger jabbed a button.

Samuel Bergen thrust a rather alarmed face into the room.

"Bergen," rasped the man, "you sent that shipment to Dangerfield?"

"Yes, sir."

"Got the receipt?"

"Yes, sir."

"Le'me see it."

"I put it in the file. I'll have to get it."

"All right. Get it."

The man vanished silently, deferentially.

Paul Pry grinned.

"Rather a joke if that shipment got stolen. Valuable?"

"Of course it's valuable. And it's not going to get stolen."

"No?"

"No. Of course not. Dangerfield's got a first-class place. His credit's A-1. He does the cream of the business at Midland. When he says he wants something, he gets it. He telephoned that order in and mentioned the time and the way he wanted it shipped. He's responsible from the minute we get the bill of lading. We ship our stuff f.o.b. shipping point."

The door opened. Samuel Bergen was back with a duplicate copy of a bill of lading. In his hand was a letter and an original bill of lading.

"Here you are, sir."

"Uh, huh."

Fenniman glowered at the documents.

"Perhaps, if you were to call Dangerfield on the phone, you'd find out the order was a fake," suggested Paul Pry. "Not, of course, that I'm given to making suggestions gratuitously, but just to show you how complete my system of information is."

R. C. Fenniman was on his feet, his sallow skin purpled with rage. The little eyes over their folds of puffed flesh glared the bitter rage of the sickly, the lips quivered with emotion.

"Get out of here. Get out before I call the police. You've got a hell of a crust telling me how to run my business! I should run up long-distance calls and offend a customer just so you can make a smart aleck out of yourself. Get on your way."

Paul Pry smiled enigmatically. He picked up his stick, adjusted his tie, took his hat, and bowed low.

"And if you should come to the conclusion that you're wrong,

if it should appear that I was right, just put an ad in the personal column of The Examiner, mentioning the amount of the reward you'll pay for the return of the stolen property. I always prefer to prevent crime for a consideration. If I can't do that I can, at least, restore stolen property—for a larger consideration. Good day to you, Mr. Fenniman, and if I might make the suggestion, a little pepsin for the stomach. And try not to get in a rage within two hours of eating. It interferes with the digestion. You'll find some excellent pepsin preparations—"

With an inarticulate roar the thin man sprang at the door. Paul Pry, his hand on the knob, casually pulled it shut and left the wholesale jeweler quivering his indignation before the blank surface of a closed door.

Paul Pry went directly to the office of the Interurban Motor Express Company.

"I shipped a package earlier in the day," he confided to the clerk. Here's the bill of lading." He handed the clerk the receipt the manicurist had lifted from Bergen's wallet, and which he had gained possession of under such unusual circumstances. "Please cancel the shipment if it hasn't gone out yet."

"We'll have to make a handling charge," the clerk warned.

Paul Pry nodded smilingly.

"Of course!" he purred.

The clerk vanished, returned with the package.

"It's scheduled for the six o'clock bus. Sure you don't want it sent out?"

"Certain. The order's been cancelled. Thank you."

"Twenty-five cent handling charge. Shipped prepaid. You've got a credit coming."

"Buy a cigar with it," said Paul Pry, as he walked out of the door with the package which had originally been sent by Samuel Bergen to Herbert Dangerfield, the bill of lading for which had been through so many adventures.

In his pocket there still remained the bill of lading for an incense burner, shipped to Herbert Dangerfield at Midland, and due to leave on the six o'clock bus—the bill of lading for the purchase he himself had made for a very good reason.

He consulted his watch, muttered an exclamation of surprise.

"How rapidly time flies," he remarked to himself, and sauntered toward the corner of the Cody Building.

A man with a pink carnation in his coat was waiting there when Paul arrived. The man seemed impatient.

Paul bowed, smiled.

"A certain young lady, who was unable to get away from her employment, requested that I deliver a certain document to you, and ask if you had any further instructions," he drawled.

The man grabbed the bill of lading.

"About time," he snapped, and hurried into the crowd, taking elaborate preparations to see that he was not followed.

But Paul Pry had no need to follow the man.

He returned to his rented roadster, parked within sight of the exit from the offices of the Interurban Motor Express Company. In the rear of that roadster was the package he had received when he had cancelled the shipment of Bergen's package and surrendered the bill of lading.

He swung into the seat, cocked his feet up on the dash, lit a cigarette, and surveyed the faces of the hurrying throng that surged around him with a smile of placid repose.

Big Front Gilvray had arranged to have the bill of lading surrendered to his man during the rush hour when the streets were at the height of late-afternoon congestion. His man surrendered the papers Paul had given him at a time when the Interurban Motor Express Company was at the peak of its rush hour, employees rushing about, packages cascading down metal-lined chutes, truck engines roaring, men sweating, telephones ringing.

The man with the carnation swung from the door of the express company with a square package under his arm. He glanced surreptitiously up and down the street, then plunged into the mass of humanity.

Ten seconds later, ensconsed in a closed car which had been parked at the curb, a car driven by a colored chauffeur in livery, the man was whisked away.

Behind that closed car, driving with consummate skill, Paul Pry piloted his rented roadster.

The chase led to an apartment building, one that was very similar to the one where Paul Pry maintained his own quarters.

The man jumped from the car, ran toward a door.

Paul Pry whistled, sharply.

The man turned. A hand went back to his hip pocket.

Paul Pry slammed on the brakes, jumped to the curb.

"I forgot to include my card with the package," he said, and extended a slip of oblong pasteboard.

The man took the pasteboard.

"How the hell did you get here?" he demanded.

Paul merely bowed, smiled.

"Thank you, thank you."

"Not so fast," growled the man. His gaze went swiftly up and down the street. "Back into that doorway, you damn fool, and keep your hands up."

Paul Pry backed into the doorway, his face wearing a pained expression of puzzled surprise.

The man with the carnation lunged forward. Blued steel glittered in his right hand.

"Stick 'm up," he said.

Paul Pry's wrist swung the cane in a glittering arc, too swiftly rapid for the eye to follow. There was the sound of a cracking click as the wood crashed against the blued steel, the whoosh of expelled breath as the point jabbed into the pit of the man's stomach.

"Touché!" exclaimed Paul Pry, as he pushed past the figure.

The man groped for his gun, his face writhing in agony, his skin greenish, his mouth open, gasping for air.

Paul Pry vaulted into the seat of his roadster. Behind it a long string of cars was clamoring for action. Paul Pry slammed in the gears. The roadster shot forward. The string of impatient cars filled up the gap. By the time the man with the carnation reached the closed car pursuit was out of the question. Paul Pry was driving at the head of a snarled mass of traffic.

He reached his apartment just as Mugs Magoo was reaching for a telephone.

"Oh, there you are, sir. I was wondering if I hadn't better find out where Gilvray was holed up and get in touch with him. I was getting a mite worried, sir."

"No need, Mugs. I had a perfectly delightful afternoon. The only thing that bothered me was the fact that Gilvray might suspect the moll of a double-cross and make it hot for her, so I had to send him my card with a brief note of thanks, telling him just how I had put two and two together."

"And did you make four?" asked Mugs.

"I think so, Mugs. I think so. We'll watch the personal column of The Examiner for the next few days. And just imagine the surprise of Big Front Gilvray when he opens the package and finds he's got one brass incense burner, no more, no less. And do you know, Mugs, I stopped at an art store and arranged to have two pounds of choice incense delivered to him at his apartment. His name's on the apartment directory, Mugs, B. F. Gilvray—can you feature that? I suppose the initials stand for Big Front?"

"Nope, they stand for Benjamin Franklin. The boys all call him Big Front. Sure he lives under his own name, right out in the open.

Paul Pry smiled.

"Benjamin Franklin, eh?" he queried.

R. C. Fenniman was obstinate. It was not until after he had exhausted every possible source of aid from police and detectives that he availed himself of Paul Pry's offer. It was one day a good two weeks after the episode of the substituted packages that Mugs Magoo looked up from The Examiner.

"Here it is, sir—an ad signed with the initials R. C. F."

> Party offering return package for reward: You were right. Order was fake. Reward of two thousand dollars offered for return. Package worth six thousand, no more.

Paul Pry chuckled.

"Make up as a panhandler, Mugs. Take the package around to him. Call his attention to the fact that it's never been opened. And if he tries to question you, simply tell him you were working the streets when a man asked you to deliver the package, take the reward and put it in this envelope."

"He may grab the package and refuse to kick through with the reward."

"That would be wonderful, Mugs. You could tell him that, if he didn't come through, the man who gave you the package said he would collect the reward with interest by methods of his own."

Mugs chuckled.

"An' I guess he's had enough of them sort of methods, sir. Bet

he's thrown a fit first and last. The receipt he returned to the express company tallied with the number on the box he got back. It's probably never occurred to 'em that the bills of lading were switched. They've been looking for an inside job in the express office."

Paul Pry lit a cigarette.

"Perhaps, Mugs. But we can't be concerned with details. By the way, drop past the Caledonia Apartments on your way back and see if Gilvray is still registered there. I would rather fancy making a little more money out of the criminal activities of this Gilvray chap. Benjamin Franklin! Fancy!"

The Racket Buster

To the police, he was a baffling, dangerous mystery, this powerful czar of the underworld. But to Paul Pry and "Mugs" Magoo, he was only the goose that laid their golden eggs.

Paul Pry lounged in well-dressed ease on a corner in the congested business district. From time to time he received provocative glances from passing women. But the eyes of Paul Pry were fastened upon the huddled figure of "Mugs" Magoo.

Mugs Magoo had earned his nickname years before when he had been the camera-eye man for one of the police administrations. A political shake-up forced him out. An accident took off his right arm at the shoulder. Booze had done the rest.

Paul Pry had found Mugs Magoo selling pencils on the street, had taken a liking to the man, learned his history, and reached a working arrangement to their mutual advantage. For Paul Pry was an opportunist of the highest degree of skill and efficiency.

Even the closest observer would have failed to observe any connection between the slender, debonaire young man on one corner and the huddled figure of the crippled pencil-seller on the other. Yet between the two passed the flowing stream of human traffic, and that stream was instantly checked by Mugs Magoo, who knew every denizen of the underworld.

A young woman, modestly attired, strikingly beautiful, gazed with dazed eyes at the snarl of traffic. Her clothes proclaimed her as coming from the country. Her air of innocent unsophistication fitted nicely with the round-eyed wonder of her expression.

Mugs Magoo dropped the hat containing his stock of pencils some two inches, and seeing Mugs' signal, Paul Pry knew that the woman was a dip or pickpocket.

His keen eyes flashed over her in swift appraisal, then darted back to Mugs Magoo, and Mugs knew that his employer was not interested.

A short, well-tailored man strutted past, shoulders back, chin up. His face was a little pasty. His manner held a little too much assurance.

Mugs Magoo let his glassy eyes flicker once over the man's features, then the hand which held the hat raised and swept in a half circle. Paul Pry interpreted the signal to mean that the man was a gangster and a killer, a gun for a mob, and a top-notcher in his profession.

But Paul Pry's eyes did not even give the gangster a second glance. He was waiting for some choice tidbit to drift into his net.

Half an hour passed without any interchange of signals. Mugs Magoo, crouched against the wall of a bank building, sold a few pencils, mumbled a few words of thanks as coins clinked into his hat, and surveyed the passing pedestrians with glassy eyes that never missed a face.

A thin, dour individual with ratty, suspicious eyes, pattered his way along the sidewalk with quick, nervous strides. Mugs Magoo's gestures meant that the man was the pay-off for a gang of big rum-runners.

Paul Pry shook his head.

Another fifteen minutes and a man who might have been a banker paused on the corner, almost directly between Mugs Magoo and Paul Pry. Paul Pry moved abruptly to get the signals Mugs was making.

The man was slightly inclined to be fat. He was about forty-five. His cheeks were clean-shaven and massaged to pinkness. His motions were slow, weighted with the dignity of one who has accustomed himself to command. About him was none of the nervousness of a man who is forced to blast a living by the sheer force of his personality. Here was the calm assurance

of one who reaps the crops others have sown. Serene, complacent, dignified, the big man with the broad chest and well-fitted waistcoat watched the flow of traffic with eyes that might have been concentrated rather upon some large financial problem than upon the composite rush of city traffic.

Mugs Magoo nodded his head, moved his hat in a circle, then shook it slightly. Paul Pry raised a hand to his hat, gave a flip to the cane which he held in his right hand, and sauntered a few steps toward the curb.

Properly interpreted, those signals meant that Mugs Magoo had recognized the dignified individual as the scout of a powerful mob, and that the mob in question was the one headed by "Big Front" Gilvray.

And Mugs Magoo had not needed Pry's answering signal to apprize him that his duties for the day were over. For it went without saying that any of the activities of Big Front Gilvray's gang would be of absorbing interest to Paul Pry. Ever since Paul Pry had found that Gilvray was far too clever to let the police pin anything on him, and that the initials B. F. reputed in the underworld to stand for Big Front, really stood for Benjamin Franklin, Paul Pry had cultivated Gilvray as a pet aversion.

Mugs Magoo gathered up his pencils, put them in a voluminous pocket, scooped the few silver coins from his hat, got to his feet, and walked away.

The portly man continued to stand in dignified meditation, his eyes fixed upon the door of the Sixth Merchants & Traders National Bank. For anything that appeared in his face or figure to the contrary, he might have been a Wall Street banker, turning over in his mind the advisability of purchasing a controlling interest in the institution. Certainly no ordinary detective would ever have placed him as a gangster, scouting out information of value to his mob.

Five minutes passed. The gangster looked at his watch, and there was something impressive in the very motion of his well-manicured hand as he took the timepiece from his waistcoat pocket.

Two more minutes. There was the rumble of heavy wheels sounding a base note deeper than the whining tires of the lighter

traffic. An armored truck rumbled to a stop before the side entrance of the bank.

Instantly special police cleared the space between door and truck. The end doors of the truck were opened. Two men with heavy revolvers bulging from shiny holsters stood at watchful attention. Employees of the bank trundled out two hand trucks loaded with small, but heavy wooden boxes.

The boxes were checked, and flung into the armored truck. One of the armed men signed a paper. The steel doors clanged shut. The armed men entered the truck through another door which, in turn, clanged shut. Then there was the grating sound of bars sliding across steel. The special police walked back into the bank. The truck rumbled out into the stream of traffic, a rolling fortress, laden with wealth, impregnable.

The men inside had sub-machine guns, and were encased in bullet-proof steel. Little slits gave them opportunity to fire in any direction. Bullet-proof glass furnished their vision of the entire four points of the compass. There would be a special police escort waiting to receive the shipment at its destination. In the meantime, thousands of dollars worth of gold was being moved safely and efficiently through the streets of the city.

The sides of the truck bore a sign, printed in the small letters of a firm that deals with conservative institutions in a conservative manner. "Bankers' Bonded Transportation Co."

Paul Pry inspected the sign with eyes that were slitted in concentrated thought. The truck turned a corner and was lost to sight. The gangster took a notebook from his pocket, took out his watch, and made a notation, apparently of the exact time.

Paul Pry managed to get a look at the face of the gangster. It was wreathed in a smile of satisfaction.

In impressive dignity, the man walked away, and Paul Pry followed him.

He walked for two blocks, and then approached the curb. Almost instantly a huge, shiny machine drew up beside him. The car was driven by a slight individual whose skin was a dead white, whose eyes were pin-pointed, but steady. In the rear of the car sat a large man whose flashing eyes were as keen as darting rapiers. Bushy brows covered those eyes as thunderheads cover the first flashes of lightning from a coming storm.

This was Big Front Gilvray. He might have been a United

States senator, or a big corporation lawyer. He was, in fact, a crook, and a leader among crooks. The police had never pinned anything definite upon Big Front Gilvray.

The man Paul Pry had been following stepped into the car, and muttered something to Gilvray. To prove it, he produced the leather-backed notebook in which he had made a pencil entry at the exact time the armored truck had received its cargo of gold.

The information was not so satisfactory to Gilvray as it had been to the man Pry had shadowed. Gilvray's brows puckered together, his eyes filmed for a moment in thought. Then he shook his head slowly, judicially, in the manner of a judge who is refusing to act upon insufficient evidence. The car purred out from the curb.

Paul Pry hailed a taxicab. Through the congested traffic he managed to keep close to the car. In the more open stretches of through boulevard he dropped some distance behind. But the big car rolled along at a rate of speed that was carefully timed to be within the law. Big Front Gilvray did not believe in allowing the police to get anything on him, even a petty traffic violation.

In the end, Paul Pry could have secured the same information from a telephone book that he paid a taxi driver seven dollars and five cents to secure. For the big, shiny automobile was piloted directly to a suburban house where B. F. Gilvray was living.

Paul Pry knew that house was listed in the telephone directory, that there would be a name plate to the side of the door containing the words "Benjamin F. Gilvray."

Big Front Gilvray had given up his city apartment and moved into the suburbs. The house was set back somewhat from the street and was rather pretentious. There was a sweep of graveled drive, a huge garage, a struggling hedge, some ornamental trees, and a well-kept lawn.

Paul Pry looked the place over, shrugged his shoulders, and had the cab drive him back to the city.

Paul Pry's apartment was in the center of the most congested district he could find. He liked the feel that he was in the midst of things, surrounded by thousands of humans. He had only to raise his window and the noises of traffic would roll into the apartment. Or, if traffic were momentarily silenced, there would

sound the shuffle, shuffle, shuffle of countless feet, plodding along the sidewalk.

Mugs Magoo was in the apartment, a bottle of whiskey at his elbow, a half emptied glass in his hand. He looked up with glassy eyes as Paul Pry entered.

"Find out anything, chief?"

"Not a thing, Mugs. The man you pointed out seemed to have gone to some trouble to find out exactly when an armored truck left the Sixth Merchants & Traders National."

"He would."

"Meaning?"

"That guy was Sam Pringle. He's one of Gilvray's best men. He got an engineer's education, and he believes in being thorough. When that bird writes down a seven it means a seven. It don't mean six and a half, or about seven, or seven an' a tenth. It means seven." And Mugs Magoo drained the rest of the whiskey in his glass.

His tone was slightly thick. His eyes were watery underneath their film, and he talked with a loquacity which he reserved for occasions of alcoholic stimulation. But Paul Pry accepted this as a part of the man's character. Mugs had cultivated the habit through too many years to put it lightly aside.

"What," asked Paul Pry, "do you know of the Bankers' Bonded Transportation Company?"

"A sweet graft. The illegal crooks built it up for the legal crooks. They have to ship gold back and forth every once in a while, now that they have lots of branch banks, and payrolls and all that sort of thing. The crooks went at it too heavy and almost killed the goose that was layin' the golden egg. A bunch of bankers got together and bought some armored trucks. They're lulus. No chance of cracking one of those things short of using a ton of dynamite. Then they bonded every employee, and got an insurance company to insure every cargo. Now the bank is responsible until the cargo gets aboard the truck. After that the bank don't have nothin' to worry about."

Mugs poured himself another drink and then continued: "In some cities the banks own their own trucks. Here, it's all done through this company. You watch 'em loading. You'll see a string of officers guarding the sidewalks. But the minute the last sack of gold bangs down on the floor of the trucks and the driver

signs a receipt, the bank pulls in its cops. If there should be a hold-up the next second the bank officers would just yawn. They're covered by insurance, and bonds and guarantees. They should worry."

Paul Pry nodded, slowly, thoughtfully. "And why should the Gilvray outfit be so interested in the time the armored trucks make their appearance? Do you suppose they contemplate staging a hold-up just as the gold hits the sidewalk? Perhaps having a regular slaughter with machine guns?"

Mugs Magoo shook his head emphatically.

"Not those babies. They go in for technique. They pull their jobs like clockwork. I'm tellin' you the department ain't ever got a thing on Big Front. They know lots, but they can't prove a thing. That's how slick he is."

Mugs Magoo reached for his glass of whiskey.

"Don't get crocked," warned Paul Pry.

"Son, there ain't enough whiskey left in the world to crock me."

"Lots of fellows have wrestled with old John Barleycorn, Mugs."

"Yeah. I ain't wrestlin'. I'm gettin' ready to take the count whenever he slips over the kayo. But what the hell's left in life for a guy with one arm and no job?"

"Maybe you could get on the force somewhere."

"Not now. They keep too accurate records."

And because the talk had made Mugs Magoo blue, he tossed off the entire glass at a gulp, and refilled it.

Paul Pry crossed to the north wall of his apartment. Here were drums, all sorts of drums. There were huge war drums, Indian ceremonial drums, snare drums, cannibal tom-toms. Paul Pry selected his favorite drum as a violinist might select a favored instrument.

It was an Indian rain drum of the Hopi tribe. It was made from a hollowed log of cottonwood, the wood burnt to proper temper and resonance. It was covered with skin, laced with rawhide thongs. The stick was made of juniper, wadded with a ball of cloth.

Paul Pry sat in a chair and boomed forth a few solemn sound-throbs from the interior of the instrument.

"Get that note of haunting resonance, Mugs. Doesn't it arouse

some savage instinct in your dormant memory cells? You can hear the pound of naked feet on the floor of a dance rock, get the suggestion of flickering camp fires, steady stars, twining bodies, dancing perhaps with rattlesnakes clasped in their teeth."

Boom—boom—boom—boom!

The drum gave forth regular cadences of weird sounds—sounds that entered the blood stream and heightened the pulse in the ears. Paul Pry's face took on an expression of savage delight. This was the manner in which he prepared himself for intellectual concentration.

But Mugs Magoo merely drank whiskey and let his bleary eyes remain fixed on a spot in the carpet.

Slowly the tempo changed. The booming of the drum became more somber. Gradually it faded into faint cadences of thrumming sound, then died away altogether. Paul Pry was in a rapt state of concentration.

Mugs Magoo poured himself another drink.

Fifteen minutes passed and became a half hour, and then Paul Pry chuckled. The chuckle rasped upon the silence of the room as a sound of utter incongruity.

Mugs Magoo cocked an eyebrow.

"Got somethin'?"

"I rather think I have, Mugs. Do you know, I have an idea I had better purchase a car."

"Another one?"

"Another one. And I think I'd better register it in the name of B. F. Gilvray at 7823 Maplewood Drive."

"Then he'd own it."

"Certainly."

"But you'd be paying for it."

"Right again. But I've always wanted to make Gilvray a present."

And Paul Pry, continuing to chuckle, arose, hung up the ceremonial drum, and reached for his stick, which contained a sword of finest steel, his hat and gloves.

"The bottle, Mugs, will have to do you for the rest of the day," he said, and went out.

Mr. Philip Borgley, first vice president of the Sixth Merchants & Traders National, regarded the dapper individual who smiled at

him with such urbane assurance, and then consulted the slip of pasteboard which was held between his fingers.

"Mr. Paul Pry, eh?"

Paul Pry continued to smile.

The banker squirmed about in his chair and frowned. He did not encourage smiles during interviews. The great god of money must be approached in a spirit of proper reverence. And Philip Borgley wished to impress upon his customers that he was the priest of the great god.

"You do not have an account here?" There was almost accusation in the question.

"No," remarked Paul Pry, and the smile became slightly more pronounced.

"Ah," observed Borgley in a tone which had shattered the hopes of many a supplicant before the throne of wealth.

But the smile upon Paul Pry's face remained.

"Well?" snapped the banker.

"The bank, I believe, has a standing reward for the recovery of stolen money?"

"Yes. In the event any is stolen."

"Ah, yes. And does the bank, perhaps, offer any rewards for crime prevention?"

"No, sir. It does not. And may I suggest that if idle curiosity prompted you to seek this interview it had best be terminated." Banker Borgley got to his feet.

Paul Pry poked at the toe of his well-fitting shoe with the tip of his cane. "How interesting. The bank will pay to recover the spoils of crime after the crime had been committed, but it will do nothing to prevent the commission of the crime."

The banker moved toward the mahogany gate that swung in the marble partition which walled off the lower part of his office.

"The reason is simple," he said, curtly. "To reward the prevention of crime would merely make it possible for some gang to plan an abortive crime, then send some slick representative here to shake us down for not committing the crime they themselves had planned."

There was no attempt to disguise the suspicion in his voice.

"I'm sorry," said Paul Pry. "I guess, under those circumstances, I'll have to let the crime go through and collect a reward for recovery."

Philip Borgley hesitated, and it was apparent from his manner that he was debating whether or not he should call the police.

Paul Pry leaned forward.

"Mr. Borgley, I am about to make a confession."

"Ah!" snapped the banker, and returned to his chair.

Paul Pry lowered his voice until it was hardly above a whisper. "Will you treat my admission in confidence?"

"No. I accept confidences only from depositors."

"Sorry," Paul Pry said.

"You were about to make a confession?"

"Yes. I'm going to tell it to you. But it's a secret. I've never admitted it before."

"Well?"

"I'm an opportunist."

The banker straightened and his face darkened.

"Are you, by any chance, trying to play a practical joke, or are you just trying to act smart?"

"Neither. I called to warn you of a theft of rather a large sum of money which is due to take place within the next few days. I am, however, an opportunist. I live, Mr. Borgley, by my wits, and my information is never imparted gratuitously."

"I see," said the banker, his voice heavy with sarcasm. "And let me point out to you, Mr. Pry, that this bank doesn't temporize with crooks. This bank is well guarded, and the guards are instructed to shoot to kill. This bank is wired with the last word in burglar alarms. This bank is protected by devices which I do not care to discuss in detail. If any crook can rob us of any of this money he is welcome to it. And if any crook tries it, this bank will send that crook to the penitentiary. So now you understand. Have I made myself clear?"

Paul Pry yawned and got to his feet.

"I would say about twenty percent would be about right. Let us say two hundred dollars on every thousand you lose. That, of course, is for recovery. I would offer to prevent the crime for a mere ten percent."

Banker Borgley quivered with rage.

"Get out," he yelled.

Paul Pry smiled as he strolled leisurely through the mahogany gate.

"By the way," he said, "I feel quite sure your disposition is

such that you would be most unpopular. I understand your best friends won't mention it. I am mentioning it because I am not your best friend. Good morning!"

The banker jabbed a finger on a button. An emergency alarm sounded and an officer came on the run.

"Show this gentleman out!" yelled the banker.

Paul Pry bowed his thanks. "Don't mention it. So good of you," he drawled.

The officer grasped Paul Pry's arm, just above the elbow, and instantly the smile vanished from Paul Pry's face. He turned to the banker.

"Are your orders that I should be ejected? Do you suggest that this officer lay his hands upon me?"

And something in the cold tone brought Borgley to a realization of lawsuits and assault actions.

"No, no," he said, hastily, and the officer dropped his hand from Paul Pry's arm.

"The price," said Paul Pry, "will be two hundred and fifty dollars for each thousand recovered. Good morning."

Truck number three of the Bankers' Bonded Transportation Company lumbered out of the garage where the trucks were stored. The driver had a series of yellow sheets in his pocket, a route list of places where calls were to be made and valuable shipments picked up.

It was a hot day, and the truck was empty. There was not five cent's worth of loot in the entire machine, and the guards were naturally enjoying the currents of air which came through the open windows. Later on, when the truck would become a rolling treasure chest, the guards would have to crouch within the hot steel tank, windows rolled up, suspicious eyes scrutinizing the surrounding traffic, perspiration smearing oily skins in a perpetual slime.

Now both driver and guard were relaxed, taking life easy. Their work had become mere routine to them. The contents of the boxes they carried meant nothing more to them than do the contents of packing cases to the drivers of department store trucks.

They were ten blocks from the garage, rolling down the

boulevard with the steady speed of controlled momentum. There came a moment when there was no other traffic in sight.

The light car which flashed from the side street and disregarded the arterial stop, crashed against the curb, skidded, and sideswiped the big armored truck.

There was the sound of a splintering crash. The driver of the truck clamped his foot on the brake pedal. He had lost a little paint from the sides of the steel car. The flivver was wrecked. Its driver was jumping up and down, gesticulating.

"What the devil do you mean hogging the road? I'll have you arrested. I'll—"

The truck driver unwound himself from behind the wheel of the armored car and jumped to the ground.

"Sa-a-ay," he snarled. "How do you get that way?"

The man who had driven the light car moved his left with the trained precision of a professional fighter. The function of that left was to measure the distance, hold the outthrust jaw of the truck driver steady. It was the flashing right which crossed to the button of the jaw and did the damage.

"Hey, you!" yelled a startled guard, and jumped out of the truck. "You're in the wrong. What the devil are you trying to do? I'm an officer, and—"

He didn't finish the sentence. A black, shiny car slid smoothly to a stop.

"I saw it," said a man and jumped to the ground. "It was the truck's fault."

"What in hell—" yelled the infuriated guard.

The truck guard stopped. The gun that bored into his middle was held in a steady hand, and the eyes of the man who held it were aglitter with businesslike efficiency.

"Get into that car and be damned quick about it, both of you," said the man, as he swung his gun to cover the two astonished guards.

At that moment the door opened and two men stepped out. The guards' jaws sagged with astonishment, for these men were attired in an exact replica of their own clothing. There were the olive drab shirts with the insignia of the Bankers' Bonded Transportation Company; the identical caps with their shields, the belted trousers with their holstered weapons dangling from belts, the puttees, the polished shoes.

They never fully recovered from their gasps of surprise, for a tap with slungshot collapsed them both like a sack of meal. Men moved with studied efficiency, and the two unconscious guards were in the shiny automobile before the first of an oncoming procession of cars came abreast of the scene of the accident.

Out of the little cluster of traffic two or three cars stopped. The drivers of these cars saw nothing unusual. The uniformed men who stood by the side of the truck were gravely exchanging license numbers with the driver of the demolished light car who was very, very meek.

The shiny sedan with drawn side curtains purred away. The meek man accepted a lift with a passing motorist. The armored truck rumbled away, and only the stolen flivver was left by the curb to mark the first step in the efficient plans of Big Front Gilvray.

From there on, it was smooth sailing. The Sixth Merchants & Traders National had some rather heavy gold shipments to make, and had telephoned its order for the truck to be at the door at a certain time.

The truck arrived, on time to the minute. The side door popped open, and special officers patrolled the sidewalk. Passing pedestrians gawked at the sight of the heavy boxes thudded to the floor of the armored car. The special officers watched the faces of the pedestrians with vigilance. The truck driver yawned as he signed the receipt for the given number of boxes.

The bank was rather casual in the matter. The drivers were bonded, the contents of the truck insured. The shipment had been safely transferred into the hands of the Bankers' Bonded Transportation Company. There was nothing to worry about. It was mere routine.

The guard slammed the door shut. The driver crawled in behind the wheel, and the truck rumbled away into traffic.

The truck was next seen abandoned by the curb in a residential district. Residents had noticed certain boxes being transferred to a delivery truck. They could give little additional information. The ones who made the transfer had worn conventional uniforms, and the residents had not been overly curious—at first.

The captured guards were released two hours later. They were groggy, mortified, enraged, and they had aching heads. They were able to give only a vague description of the men who had

engineered the capture of the truck, and the police knew that these men, unmasked as they were, were crooks imported especially for this one job.

They were at a standstill, but they hesitated to admit it. They made a great show of getting fingerprints from the armored car, but they might as well have saved their time.

Philip Borgley immediately reported his interview with Paul Pry, and insisted that Pry must be one of the robbers. The police laughed. They had crossed the trail of Paul Pry before. That young man was just what he claimed to be—an opportunist. He had solved several crimes, and in every event had collected a reward. The total of those rewards amounted to a tidy income.

But the police had investigated Paul Pry from one side to the other. His methods were shrouded in mystery. His technique was baffling. But he was not in league with any criminal.

All of which called Paul Pry to the attention of the directors of the bank who were in session.

At about that time the bank's counsel delivered his opinion. The Bankers' Bonded Transportation Company was not responsible for the loss. They had never sent a truck to the bank, had never signed for the shipment. The theft of the truck had been completed before it called at the bank. Therefore, the bank had voluntarily delivered its shipment of gold to two crooks.

The directors promptly announced a reward for the recovery of the stolen gold. But gold is hard to identify and easy to divide. It looked very much as though the bank was about to make a rather large entry in red ink upon its books of account.

Paul Pry knew of the reward within half an hour of the time it was announced. He telephoned the bank to verify the report, and then sauntered to the parking station which was around the corner from his apartment.

He had sufficient information to lay before the police to secure a search warrant for the residence of Benjamin F. Gilvray, and doubtless recover the missing coin. But Paul Pry had no intention of killing the goose that laid his golden eggs. Big Front Gilvray had indirectly furnished Paul Pry with a very nice income during the past few months.

At the parking station, Paul Pry surrendered a ticket and had delivered to him a new, shiny automobile. This automobile was

registered in the name of Benjamin F. Gilvray, 7823 Maplewood Drive, although the information would have come as a distinct shock to Benjamin F. Gilvray.

Paul Pry drove the new car to a point well out of traffic, parked it, and switched to a red roadster which was registered in his own name. He drove this roadster to a point about a block and a half from the residence at 7823 Maplewood Drive, and parked it. Then he called a taxicab and returned to the place where he had parked the new automobile he had registered in the name of the arch-gangster.

In a deserted side street, Pry stopped the car, opened the tool box, and took out a big hammer. With this hammer he started operations on the left front fender.

When he had finished, the car presented a striking appearance. The shiny newness of its factory finish was marred by a left front fender which was as battered as a wad of discarded tinfoil. The paint had been chipped off. The fender had been rubbed against a telephone pole and dented in countless places.

By this time it was the dusk of early evening, and Paul Pry blithely piloted his new car out into the boulevard.

At a side street where there was a little traffic, yet enough potential danger to warrant an automatic signal, Paul parked the car and awaited his opportunity.

A traffic officer stood just under the automatic signal box on the southwest corner, peering sharply at such machines as passed. He was there to arrest violators, the theory being that the amount thus received in fines would more than offset his salary.

When Paul Pry considered the moment opportune, he eased his car away from the curb. The street was deserted as far as he could see in both directions. The traffic signal was againt him.

The rest was absurdly simple.

With the bewildered stupidity of a new driver, he slowly drove the car out into the middle of the intersection and brought it to a stop only when the whistle of the officer on duty had blown its third imperative summons.

The position in which the car had stopped was such that Paul had an uninterrupted view up and down both streets. He was, in fact, almost in the exact center of the intersection.

The traffic officer, striding purposefully and irately to the left side of the machine, took due note of the crumpled fender and the

new finish of the car. His voice held that tone of patient weariness with which mothers address wayward children after waywardness has become a habit.

"I suppose you're blind and can't see, and deaf and can't hear. You didn't know there was a traffic signal, nor hear me yelling for you to stop."

Paul Pry drew himself up with dignity.

"You," he said, slowly and distinctly, "can go to hell. I am B. F. Gilvray, Benjamin Franklin Gilvray."

The officer, his ears attuned to expectation of humble excuses, and half-inclined to be charitable with the driver of a new car, recoiled as though he had been struck. His face darkened, and the air of patient sarcasm slipped from him.

"You half-pint of a lounge lizard! You start talking to me like that and I'll push your nose so hard it'll stick wrong side out the back of your head. Who the bloody hell do you think you're talking to?"

And he thrust his rage-mottled face over the edge of the front door and glowered at Paul Pry.

Pry made no answer, none whatever.

For a full five seconds the officer glowered, hoping that the culprit would give him an excuse to use sufficient force to make an arrest on the charge of resisting an officer. But Paul Pry remained immobile.

The officer snorted and went to the front of the machine. He took down the license number, strode majestically back to the car and jerked open the left front door.

"Got your fender smashed. Did that just recently, didn't yuh?"

"That, my man, is none of your business."

The officer's hand shot into the car, clutched the collar of Paul Pry's coat, and Paul Pry came violently out from behind the steering wheel.

"Sa-a-ay, you've got lots to learn, you have. Get out your driving license and be quick about it. You're going to take a drive to headquarters. That's where you're going!"

And, still holding Paul Pry by the collar, he reached in his free hand and ripped out the registration certificate.

There was no traffic up either street. The intersection showed no approaching headlights. There were no pedestrians. Paul Pry had carefully chosen his corner and his time. Abruptly he

changed from a passive but impudent citizen in the hands of the law, to a bundle of steel muscles, and wire-hard sinews.

"Crack!" the impact of his fist on the side of the officer's head sounded like a muffled pistol shot.

The officer staggered back, rage, surprise, and pain on his features. Paul Pry snapped his left home with that degree of accurate precision in timing which denotes the trained fighter.

The blow seemed almost unhurried, so perfectly timed was it, so gracefully were the arm and shoulder swung behind the punch. But the officer went down like a sack of meal, the registration certificate still clutched in his left hand.

Paul Pry got into the automobile, slipped in the clutch and purred down the street, turned on the next through boulevard and drove directly in front of the residence of Big Front Gilvray, where he parked the automobile.

Then he strolled across the street, sat down in the shadow of a hedge, and smoked a cigarette.

The house of Big Front Gilvray showed as a gloomy and silent pile of darkness. There was no sign of light from the windows, no sound of occupancy from within. The house was shrouded in watchful silence. But it was a tense silence. One sensed that perhaps there might be a cautious face, pressed against the glass of an upper window, surveying the street—that other faces at the four corners of the house might be cautiously inspecting the night.

It was a full half hour before Paul heard the wail of a siren, the sound of a clanging gong. The street reflected the rays of a red spotlight. The police were going to make something of a ritual of it. They had brought the patrol wagon with them.

Paul Pry walked down the street to the place where he had left his roadster, got in, started the motor, and warmed up the engine. Then he switched off the ignition the better to hear any sounds that the night had to offer.

The wagon drew up to the big residence with something of a flourish.

"Here we are, boys!" yelled someone. "Lookit the car! It's the kind Bill said, and the front fender's caved."

Another voice growled, "Drag him out."

The police car discharged figures who moved with grim

determination up the walk to the house. The front steps boomed the noise of their authoritative feet into the night, and there came the sound of nightsticks beating a tattoo upon wooden panels.

But the door didn't open immediately.

The house gave forth signs of muffled activity. Then a porch light clicked on, and Big Front Gilvray stood in the doorway, his frame blocking out the soft glow from a lighted hallway.

Big Front lived true to his name. He put on a bold front. Behind him there were men armed with machine guns, determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible; but these men were out of sight, hidden where their guns could sweep hallways and staircases with the most deadly angle of fire.

Paul Pry heard Gilvray's booming voice.

"What in hell is the meaning of this outrage?"

It was Gilvray's code to be impressive, always to keep the other man on the defensive.

The only answer to the question was a counter question from one of the officers.

"Are you Benjamin F. Gilvray of 7823 Maplewood Drive?"

"I am. And I want to know—"

What Big Front Gilvray wanted to know was drowned in the sound made by a heavy fist impacting soft flesh. There followed the scuffle of feet, the thud of blows. After an interval someone said, "You're under arrest," and a knot of struggling figures threshed their way toward the patrol wagon.

There was the clanging of a bell, the wail of a siren, the roar of an exhaust, and the patrol wagon was on its way. From within could be seen moving figures, silhouetted against the lighted ribbon of roadway.

Big Front Gilvray was resisting arrest and the figures were doing their stuff.

Paul Pry started the motor on his car and slipped to the side street. From this position he could command a view of the alley entrance from the garages, also of the graveled driveway.

Lights blazed on in the house, then were subdued. Doors banged. There was the sound of running steps. A car shot out of one of the garages, skidded at the turn into the side street, and roared into the night. It was filled with men.

A truck followed. There were two men in the driver's seat. The

cargo of the truck was covered with canvas. It was not particularly bulky.

Paul Pry followed the red light of the truck.

He kept well to the rear, yet, with the flexibility of his powerful roadster, was able to command the situation. The truck could not get away. Paul Pry drove without headlights and was invisible to the occupants of the truck.

The chase led for nearly a mile, and then the truck turned into a public garage. Paul Pry drove around the block and piloted his red roadster into the same garage.

The truck of the gangsters was parked at one end of the place and a sleepy-eyed attendant came forward with a ticket. His eyes were swollen with sleep, and he sucked in a prodigious yawn as he stretched his hands high above his head.

"I'd better park it," said Paul Pry. "The reverse is sticking a little."

The man in the dirty overalls yawned again and sleepily pushed a ticket into the crack over the hinges of the hood. That ticket was numbered, a string of black figures on a red background. The other half of the ticket, bearing a duplicate number, he thrust into Paul Pry's hand.

"Right next to the truck?" asked Paul casually, and didn't wait for an answer.

He drove the car down the dimly lit aisle of the garage, backed it into the first vacant stall to the side of the truck, switched off motor and lights, and got out.

It was, perhaps, significant that he got out of the car on the side that was nearest the truck, and that his hand rested against the hood of the powerful truck as he walked between the stalls.

In the dim light of the place, the sleepy-eyed attendant had no idea that Paul Pry was switching squares of pasteboard, that the red ticket which had been thrust into the hood of the roadster now adorned the truck, and that the truck ticket was transferred to the roadster.

Paul Pry had hardly intended to play the game in just that manner. He felt certain the gangsters, alarmed over the arrest of Big Front Gilvray, would transfer the treasure cargo, but he had hardly counted upon the audacious move by which they sought to insure safety for themselves.

It was simple. The very simplicity of it was its best protection.

They felt the police might be on their trail. Therefore the thing to do was to place the stolen cargo where it would never be found. What more simple solution than to treat the boxes of gold as just an ordinary truck cargo, park the truck for the night, and make no further move until they heard from Gilvray.

If the police had the goods on Gilvray, the gangsters could take the truck's cargo, transfer it to fast touring cars and leave the city. If it was a false alarm, the gold was removed from the house which might be searched on general principles. If the police had complete information and knew the emergency headquarters the gang had established, a raid would reveal no incriminating evidence.

Paul Pry, however, was an opportunist. He had intended only to make certain that the gold was collected in one place, and then notify the police of that hiding place and claim the reward. As it was, he had an opportunity to make a much more spectacular recovery of the treasure, and leave the gang intact—an organization of desperate criminals, ready to commit other crimes upon which Pry might capitalize.

So it happened that when Pry left the garage he had with him a square of pasteboard containing a number, and, upon that truck with its illegal cargo, was a duplicate ticket containing the same number.

Paul Pry chuckled to himself as he walked out into the night.

He telephoned Sergeant Mahoney at headquarters.

"Pry talking, sergeant. There's a reward out for the recovery of the gold that was slicked from the Sixth Merchants & Traders National?"

"I'll say there is. You haven't got a lead on it, have you?"

"Yeah. What say you drive out to the corner of Vermont and Harrison? I'll meet you there with the gold. You take the credit for the recovery and keep my name out of it. We split the reward fifty-fifty."

The sergeant cleared his throat.

"I'd like to do that all right, Pry. But it happens you've figured in two or three rewards lately. How come you get the dope so easily?"

Paul Pry laughed. "Trade secret, sergeant. Why?"

"Well, you know, someone might claim you were pulling the crimes in order to get the rewards."

"Don't be silly, sergeant. If I'd taken the risk of pulling this job I wouldn't surrender the coin for a fraction of its value. These boxes don't contain jewels. They contain gold coin and currency. I could take the stuff out and spend it—if I didn't want to turn it back. But if you think it might make trouble, we'll just forget it and I won't back the shipment and you can go ahead and work on the case in your own way."

"No, no, Pry! I was just thinking out loud. You're right. The corner of Harrison and Vermont? I'll be here in twenty minutes."

Paul Pry hung up the telephone, then rang his apartment. Mugs Magoo answered the ring.

"You drunk, Mugs?"

"No."

"Sober?"

"No."

"All right. Get a cab and pick up a pair of overalls and a cap, also a jumper. Get a leather coat if you can't get a jumper. Bring them to me in a rush. You'll find me at a drug store out on Vermont, near a Hundred and Tenth Street. Make it snappy."

And Paul Pry settled himself comfortably in the drug store, picked up a magazine, purchased a package of cigarettes and prepared to enjoy himself.

It took Mugs Magoo half an hour to bring the things. Paul Pry changed in the taxicab and arrived at the garage with clothes that were soiled and grimy. A little tobacco in his eyes gave them a reddened inflamed appearance.

He was cursing when the sleepy-eyed attendant, dozing in a chair tilted back against the office wall, extended a mechanical hand.

"That damned truck. Can you beat it? I don't any more than get to sleep when the boss rings up and tells the wife I've got to take that load down to the warehouse tonight, pick up a helper and start on another trip."

The attendant looked at Paul Pry with a puzzled frown.

"You the one that brought in that truck?"

Paul yawned and flipped him the red pasteboard.

"Uh huh," he said.

The attendant walked back to the truck, compared the numbers on the tickets, nodded.

"Your face looked familiar, but I thought—"

He didn't finish what he had thought.

Paul Pry got in the truck, switched on the ignition, got the motor roaring to life, turned on the headlights and drove to the street. Mugs Magoo in the taxicab, an automatic clutched in his left hand, guarded the rear. The treasure truck rumbled down the boulevard.

At the corner of Harrison, Sergeant Mahoney was parked in a police car. He shook hands with Paul Pry and ran to the canvas-covered cargo of the truck. A moment's examination convinced him.

"God, there should be a promotion in this!"

Paul Pry nodded.

"You drive the truck to headquarters. Claim you shook the information out of a stoolie. I'll drive your roadster to my apartment. You can have one of your men pick it up later. By the way, I've got a red roadster out at Magby's Garage, a mile or so down the street. I've lost my claim check for it. Wish you'd send a squad out there and tell the garage man it's a stolen car. You can leave it in front of my apartment when you pick up your car."

Sergeant Mahoney surveyed Paul Pry with eyes that were puckered to mere glinting slits.

"Did you switch tags and steal this truck, son?"

Paul Pry shook his head. "I can't very well answer that question."

"Afraid of something? You'd have police protection if you committed a technical robbery of a gangster truck."

Pry laughed. "No. There's a more personal reason than that."

"Which is?"

"That I don't want to kill the goose that's laying my golden eggs."

Sergeant Mahoney emitted a low whistle.

"Golden eggs is right! But you're monkeying with dynamite, son. You'll be pushin' up daisies if you play that game."

"Possibly," agreed Paul Pry. "But, after all, that's what makes the game more interesting. And it's something that's entirely between me and—"

"And who?" asked the officer eagerly.

"And a gentleman to whom I have presented a new car," said Paul Pry. With which cryptic remark, he walked toward the police roadster.

"Take good care of that truck, and good night, sergeant. Let me know about your promotion."

The sergeant was clambering into the driver's seat of the truck as Paul Pry stepped on the starter of the police roadster. In the morning another consignment of golden eggs would find its way to him—one half of the reward money posted by the bank for a loss which it might have prevented.

The Daisy-Pusher

"Big Front" Gilvray was sore—damned sore. That's why he hired the slickest killer in the game to put an end to the mysterious Paul Pry. But Paul Pry, terror to both the police and gangsters alike, had an amazing, strange way of dealing with killers!

Paul Pry lounged at indolent ease upon what was, perhaps, one of the busiest corners in the high-class shopping district.

The early afternoon shoppers filed past in twin streams of eddying humanity. Occasionally some provocative glance was flashed at Paul Pry. But those glances were wasted, for Paul Pry had his entire attention centered upon a human derelict who crouched against the wall of a bank building and held forth a hat filled with pencils.

The crouched figure presented a perfect picture of dejection—one arm gone at the shoulder, clothes shabby and unclean, face covered with a day's growth of beard, eyes glassy with hopelessness.

Only a most shrewd observer would have noticed that there was any connection between this huddled wreck of humanity and the slender, well-dressed figure of Paul Pry, standing at graceful ease.

But the pencil vendor was "Mugs" Magoo, the man who never forgot a face.

Years before, Mugs Magoo had been the official camera-eye for one of the police administrations in a large city. A political shake-up had thrown him out. An accident had lost him his right arm at the shoulder, and booze had done the rest.

Paul Pry had cultivated Mugs Magoo as a casual acquaintance, had found out the man's uncanny gift for remembering faces, and had employed the cripple.

Paul Pry might best be described as an opportunist. His activities were always within the law. The police frowned upon these activities, yet regarded the young man with a very wholesome respect. For Paul Pry's total income ran into a very large figure each year. And yet he lived by his wits.

Mugs Magoo stared at the twin streams of pedestrians with glassy eyes and, from time to time, made signals with his head and hand. Such signals classified the various petty crooks who frequented the shopping lanes. An innocent girl from the country became a pickpocket under Mugs Magoo's searching eyes. An open-faced countryman of rugged, sun-tanned honesty called forth Mugs' signal for a confidence man. There was the usual assortment of bootleggers and petty criminals.

Only once did Mugs Magoo bow his head slightly, indicating that the man who was passing him at the moment was a big shot. Even then Paul Pry gave no answering signal, for Paul Pry was waiting for a break.

For seven days now the two had worked the streets without pause. Seven fruitless days of observation and signal, seven days of ceaseless scanning.

Mugs Magoo knew what Pry was waiting for—a crack at the gang of "Big Front" Gilvray.

The glassy eyes looked up into the passing faces.

"Pencils, mister?" said Mugs Magoo in his wheedling monotone.

The man strode by.

Mugs Magoo turned his eyes to the man behind.

"Pencils, mister?"

And, despite himself, something of the monotone had left his voice. There was a quaver of suppressed excitement, a note of tension.

But the ears of the man who was passing were not attuned to

subtle tone variations on the part of street beggars. He strode past with eyes that never even flickered to the crouched form.

Mugs Magoo bowed his head, moved his hat in a circle and shook it slightly. Instantly Paul Pry raised a hand to his hat, gave a flip to the cane which he held in his right hand, and sauntered a few steps toward the curb.

Mugs Magoo took the pencils from his hat, scooped out a few silver coins, sighed and clapped the hat on his head. His duties for the day were over.

Paul Pry fell in behind the man who had attracted his attention. He was a dour-faced individual with an expression of frozen dignity stamped upon his immobile countenance. He walked with measured steps that were painfully precise and slow. His mouth was clamped in a rigid line of punctilious silence.

He was a scout for the powerful gang of Big Front Gilvray. Mugs Magoo's signals had conveyed that much information to Paul Pry. And that much information was all that Pry needed to start him upon another of his spectacular adventures.

The gangster walked across the street, paused for a moment at a window display, then paced methodically down a side street where the sidewalks were a little less congested.

Paul Pry followed.

Before he had gone half the block, Pry was aware of two very curious things. One was that the man he shadowed was in turn shadowing another. The second thing was that an automobile crawled along in the stream of traffic, keeping exact pace with the gangster.

Paul Pry shot a glance at the occupants of that automobile. The man at the wheel was restless-eyed, alert. His hands were slender, well cared for and graceful. His neck was rather heavy, encased in the collar of a silk shirt and wrapped about with a ten dollar scarf. His left ear was cauliflowered.

The man in the rear seat was holding an oblong something upon the side of the car. Paul Pry puckered his forehead as he recognized the nature of that object. It was a motion-picture camera.

The block was traversed. The automobile sped away on an open signal. The gangster scout continued his steady pacing.

Paul Pry determined to get a look at the man ahead, the one

who was being tailed by the shadower who was in turn being shadowed. He quickened his pace, passed the gangster, walked on past the man the gangster was following, and paused at the corner, consulting with bewildered eyes an envelope he had pulled from his pocket. Then he glanced about him at the numbers on the buildings.

In that position he was able to flash a glance at the face of the man he wanted to observe.

He barely suppressed a start of surprise as his eyes fastened upon that face. It was a face upon which was stamped a frozen dignity, a punctilious politeness. The mouth was clamped in a rigid line of deliberate silence. In short, the face was an exact duplicate of the face of the gangster.

It was as though the gangster had suddenly become twins. Paul Pry's startled eyes flashed from the man in the lead to the gangster who followed.

Their clothes were of the same pinstriped serge. Their collars were the same. Their ties were the same. Their shoes were the same. Their very facial expressions were the same, and they paced in deliberate dignity the pavements of the city street but a few yards apart.

Paul Pry consulted the back of the envelope he held in his left hand, lest the gangster should detect the interest in his eyes. But the precaution was needless. The gangster's every sense seemed to be concentrated upon the figure he followed.

Once more Paul Pry fell into the rear of the procession.

There was no further trace of the automobile from which the motion pictures had been taken. The man in the lead entered a store, emerged after a few moments with two parcels. The gangster who shadowed dropped behind as though he had lost his interest. The man in the lead took a taxicab. The gangster turned and walked in the opposite direction. His gait ceased to be a measured pace of slow dignity and became, instead, a quick, nervous walk.

Paul Pry hesitated for barely two seconds, then stepped to the curb and hailed a passing cab. He had determined to shadow the gangster's double.

In doing this he encountered no difficulty whatever. The task was absurdly simple. The man in the cab ahead was driven directly to the exclusive residential district on Longacres Drive.

His cab stopped before number 5793, and the man paid the driver the meter toll with a gesture of condescending dignity. Then he paced toward the house in frigid silence.

"That all, boss?" asked the driver of Paul Pry's cab.

"That's the end of it. Take me to the corner of Broadway and Gramercy."

The cab driver spun the machine around the corner.

Paul Pry entered his apartment in the manner of one who is wrapped in thought.

Mugs Magoo was sprawled in an easy chair, a bottle of whiskey on the table at his side, a glass in his hand. He looked up with bleary eyes, raised his glass.

"Here's mud 'n yer eye!"

Paul Pry deposited his hat and stick, sank into another chair and regarded his confederate with narrowed eyes.

"You've hit half the bottle since you left me, Mugs," he said.

Mugs Magoo squirmed under the accusation of the tone.

"This here's the last glass I'm drinkin' until night," he explained.

Paul Pry lit a cigarette.

"It's your own business, Mugs," he said. "I'm not the type to attempt to impose my will upon my fellow man, only you've got to keep fit if you're going to work with me. I can't use a brain that's muddled in alcohol."

Mugs Magoo laughed, but the laugh was nervous.

"Forget it. My brain uses alcohol as lubricatin' oil. What's on your mind, chief?"

"The gangster, who was he?"

Mugs Magoo finished the last drop in the glass, looked longingly at the bottle, then set the glass down on the table.

"Funny guy. Ain't seen him for six years, but I heard he was with Gilvray now. He's known as 'Double' Phil Delano. Used to be an actor, and a good one, too. He can double for anybody that's anywhere near his size and build; an expert with the make-up and such stuff.

"They use him when they want an alibi. Double Phil Delano makes up as the guy he wants to alibi and sticks around. The guy goes to the restaurant he's picked, speaks to all of his friends,

kids a couple of dames along, and then settles down to some steady drinking.

"After a while he goes to the dressing room and slips out. Double Phil Delano slips in and takes the place his alibi has just vacated. He's a little slopped with drink, but quiet and not making a nuisance out of himself. Everybody sees him. He sits there and laps up a little booze and kills time until he gets a signal.

"Then he goes to the dressing room. His alibi slips in, has a few more drinks, and then goes and talks with the proprietor or somebody and maybe drops his watch and busts it. That helps to fix the time.

"Later on when the bulls start prodding around on the back trail of the suspect they find an iron-clad alibi. That's the racket of Double Phil Delano. He rakes down big money understudying the crooks that want to have things go just so.

"He was in disguise today. He was holdin' his mouth funny, and he had a dignified expression on his map, but he's got a little finger broken on his left hand. It's a funny break. Once you've seen it you won't forget it. I spotted that finger first. But I had to look a second time to make sure it was Phil."

Mugs Magoo reached for the empty glass, then let his hand stop halfway to the table.

"Aw shucks!" he muttered thickly.

Paul Pry slitted his eyes into glittering concentration.

"Know the man he was shadowing?"

"Never saw him before, chief."

Paul Pry nodded, beat upon the arm of his chair with his fingertips, then arose and crossed the room to a closet. The glass door of this closet showed an interior filled with drums. There were cannibal tribe drums, war drums, Indian ceremonial drums, snare drums and tom-toms. They hung from the walls of the closet in profusion.

Paul Pry selected a ceremonial drum of the South Seas. It was made of hide stretched across hollowed bamboo. Returning to his chair, he started a soft beating upon the taut surface of dried skin.

The apartment seemed fairly filled with the resulting noise, a throbbing sound that entered the pulses of the blood, boomed in the brain, rumbled back upon the ears from the walls of the apartment in maddening sound cadences.

"For the love o' Mike!" exclaimed Mugs Magoo, moving restlessly in his chair. "That drum always gives me the willies. It makes my blood jump."

Paul Pry nodded dreamily.

"It would. It's the primitive song of power, of lust, of life. You can almost hear the stamping of bare feet, the cries of the women. It reminds me of a blazing fire, a circle of warriors, dancing plumes, shaking spears, pounding feet. And under it all, the sound of the drum, a background of primitive noise. Listen to it, Mugs!"

"Boom . . . boom . . . boom."

Mugs Magoo got up from his chair.

"You hypnotize yourself with them drums, chief. It's a habit. You'd better cut it out."

Paul Pry shook his head dreamily.

"No. It helps my nerves. Go out to 5793 Longacres Drive and find out who owns the place. Tell 'em you're from the water company. Get all the information you can. Take cabs in both directions and make it snappy. I have an idea we'll have to use a little speed on this job."

Mugs Magoo looked longingly at the whiskey bottle.

"Of course, if I'm going out—"

Paul Pry ceased his drumming to glare at the cripple.

"You'd better get started," he finished for the hesitant Mugs.

"Yessir," remarked Mugs Magoo, lurched to his feet, took his hat and was gone.

Behind him, Paul Pry drummed out sound cadences that reverberated through the apartment, low booming sounds that seemed almost without point of origin.

He was still in the same chair when Mugs returned. He had ceased to drum, but his eyes were pin-points of concentration, and there was a pencil and a bit of paper in his hand.

He grinned at Mugs.

"Before you say a word, Mugs, I want to know if the man is the butler. If he is, I know the answer."

Mugs Magoo's glassy eyes widened in surprise.

"Sure he's the butler, guy by the name o' Pete Filbert, an' the chap that owns the house is Rodney Goldcrest. They're lousy

with coin. The butler's the last word. The folks are newly rich, awful rich an' awful new."

Paul Pry's smile became a grin.

"Ah," he said, and there was a purring undertone to his voice like that of a big tiger stalking its prey.

"You goin' to tie into Big Front Gilvray again, chief?"

"Certainly, why?"

"It ain't healthy. Gilvray's a big-time guy. I'm tellin' you, he's made monkeys out of the police. They never can get anything on him, and he's working all the time."

"Well, what about it, Mugs?"

"Nothin'. Only I'd concentrate on somebody else for a while. Big Front Gilvray is dynamite."

Paul Pry leaned forward and jabbed his forefinger at the chest of Mugs Magoo.

"Know what he is? He's a crook. He has the name B. F. Gilvray, and the B. F. stands for Benjamin Franklin. It's a hot note when a gangster sports the name of Benjamin Franklin on his name plate. The boys call him Big Front, and he lives up to the name. By the time I get done with him, he won't have any big front. I'm going to ride that man clean out of business. If the police can't reach him, I can. He's my goose that's laying the golden egg. His crimes have netted me thousands of dollars in the last three months, and they're going to net me more."

Mugs Magoo shook his head.

"He's too big, boss," he warned. "You'll be stretched out on a marble slab with weights on your eyelids."

Paul Pry chuckled.

"Well, it's a fair fight," he said. Then he took his hat and stick and went out.

Hardly had the door closed than Mugs Magoo reached for the whiskey bottle and tilted it to his lips. Then, with a sigh of content, he dropped back into the cushioned chair and relaxed.

It was early in the evening when the ringing of the telephone aroused him from the sleep into which he had dropped. Paul Pry's voice answered his hello.

"Hello, Mugs. Are you sober?"

Mugs Magoo rubbed his sleep-swollen eyes. Blinking in the light of the reading lamp, he glanced at the empty whiskey bottle, and grunted his reply.

"I ain't been sober for seven years. Why should I celebrate now?"

"Are you pickled?"

"Son, I can't get pickled. I get just so much inside of me, an' then the blamed stuff evaporates through the pores of my skin as fast as I pour it in. Was there somethin' I could do? I'm just right."

"Yes," said Paul Pry. "Come to the Bargemore Hotel and ask for George Crosby." And the telephone receiver at the other end of the line clicked into place.

Mugs Magoo rubbed some of the sleep from his eyes. "Let's hope this Crosby guy has got some drinkin' whiskey," he said, and reached for his shabby hat.

At the Bargemore Hotel his eyes widened in surprise when he found that George Crosby was none other than Paul Pry, registered under the assumed name, given a room, and already very much at home.

"I just wanted to show you the news," said Pry.

He thrust one of the evening papers, damp from the press, under the eyes of the ex-detective.

Mugs Magoo scanned the screaming headlines.

SOCIETY MATRON SLUGGED
GOLDCREST GEMS GONE

Mugs Magoo grunted his interest, sat down in one of the typical overstuffed chairs with which the hotel room was furnished, and knitted his brows over the printed account.

When he had finished, he regarded Paul Pry with a speculative scowl.

"She was dressin' for a ball," he said.

"Precisely."

"And the butler got drunk an' slugged 'er. When she came to, her hundred thousand dollar diamond necklace was gone."

"Correct."

"But the butler was still there."

"Exactly."

"Stewed to the gills."

"So the paper says."

"And he couldn't remember nothing about what had happened.

He took a drink. He claims it was a single drink. But he got stewed on it an' went blotto."

"Well?"

"Oh, nothin', but I can see what happened easy enough. They slipped him a drugged drink. Big Front Gilvray had a moll in the house, planted for the job probably. She jiggled a little powder in his drink. Then Double Phil Delano slipped in, pretended to be pie-eyed, hunted up the missus, had an argument, slugged her, took the diamond necklace, an' left the poor butler to take the rap."

Paul Pry nodded.

"That, Mugs, is exactly what happened. Only the thoughtful Mr. Delano went one step farther. He planted some stolen gems of small value upon the form of the unconscious butler. The police found them."

"A slick frame-up," remarked Mugs Magoo. "Double Phil Delano has been changin' his tactics. He always went in for alibi stuff before. But now Big Front Gilvray has got hold of him he's usin' him for rough stuff. But it's pretty smooth at that!"

Paul Pry nodded thoughtfully.

"There's quite a bit in the paper about the Goldcrest history, Mugs. It seems they made their money on the stock market crash. They consistently sold everything short and stayed with it. They cleaned up a lot of money out of the misfortunes of others."

"Yeah," agreed Mugs Magoo. "I told you they was newly rich, awful rich an' awful new."

Paul Pry chuckled.

"I'm on my way out to see them. I want you to hold down the room. If any calls come in answer them. Don't give out any information. Just get the numbers that call."

Mugs Magoo looked puzzled.

"You expectin' calls?"

"Yes."

"Who from?"

"Newspapers."

"What'll they want to know?"

"That," said Paul Pry, "depends upon various things." And out he went, whistling cheerily.

Mugs Magoo groaned and settled down in the chair.

* * *

Paul Pry staged his entrance at the Goldcrest mansion when there was a slight lull in the excitement incident to newspaper interviews, flashlight photographs and police surveillance.

He rang the door bell and smiled patronizingly at the young woman who answered it.

"Tell Mr. Goldcrest that George Crosby is here."

The girl looked blank.

"He was expecting you?"

But there sounded swift steps thudding down the corridor and an avalanche of weight pushed her to one side.

"Come right in, Mr. Crosby, come right in. I've got awful bad news for you, awful bad. I got your wire a coupla hours ago, but, would you believe it, I ain't got the diamonds."

Paul Pry, assuming the name of George Crosby, and carrying himself with cordial dignity, clucked his sympathy.

"Nothing serious, I hope."

The paunchy man with purple jowls and pop eyes regarded him with hands that waved shoulder high, palms outward.

"Serious? My wife is slugged, the necklace gone! Ain't that serious? But come in, come on in and have a chair. Have a cigar, have a drink. Your wire said you were buyer for a private collector who didn't want his name known. How'd you hear about the necklace?"

Paul Pry followed his host into an overfurnished living room and dropped into the indicated chair.

"But this is dreadful!" he exclaimed.

"Sure it's dreadful. A hundred thousand dollar necklace!"

Paul Pry's eyes grew searching.

"Did you pay a hundred thousand for it?" he asked.

Rodney Goldcrest ran a pudgy forefinger around the inside of his moist shirtband.

"Well, of course, between the two of us, it wasn't quite that much. But it was a big sum, an' the wife likes to see her name in print, so I made it a hundred thousand even for the newspaper chaps."

"And it's gone?"

"Gone slick as a whistle, Mr. Crosby. And when I got your wire I knew it was a bad break all around. You know if some collector had paid a fancy price for the necklace, or had even

offered a fancy price, it'd have given the wife a lot of publicity. The little woman likes to see her picture in the papers. An' you know how it is with women. You gotta humor 'em."

Paul Pry nodded slowly.

"Yes. I see. But this is a dreadful misfortune. The gems in that necklace came from a certain source which I will not divulge at the present time. But I believe my chief would have gone as high as two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for them.

"You see, diamonds vary. That is due both to the gems as well as the manner in which they are cut and polished. Now there was a certain gem-cutter who achieved wonderful results with a diamond from a certain locality.

"I must naturally be vague about the details, Mr. Goldcrest, both to protect the name of my client as well as to prevent a sharp advance in the price of certain diamonds. But I can assure you that if it hadn't been for this unfortunate robbery your wife would have had her picture in the rotogravure section of every society paper in the land. She would have been the proud possessor of a valuable bit of jewelry which would have branded her as a woman of taste and refinement."

Goldcrest's eyes glinted.

"That's the line! That's just what the little lady wants, taste an' refinement. That's the line she's tryin' to get across. You know it ain't easy to crash into the better class of society right off the jump. We moved out here in this neighborhood so it'd look right on our stationery, and we've gone to lots of trouble to do everything right. But we ain't had much success.

"Not that I mind. It's the little woman that I care about. She's set her heart on it. The newspapers don't give us the breaks. We keep the boys in cigars and whiskey, and keep 'em supplied with pictures, but they don't use 'em."

Paul Pry interrupted.

"It sure is tough. And especially since my chief is very prominent socially. However, there seems to be nothing that can be done about it. Please keep my telegram and my mission secret. I'm at the Bargemore Hotel if you get any trace of the gems. Don't say a word to anyone, though."

Goldcrest nodded.

"I can keep my mouth shut. But I want you to meet the little lady. She's a bit shaken up, but she'll be glad to see you. We

talked a lot about your wire. You wait right here, and I'll get her down right away."

And Rodney Goldcrest heaved his great bulk from the chair and waddled in stately dignity from the room.

Five minutes and he was back, his face beaming.

On his arm was a matron who was as inclined to fleshiness as her husband. There was a welt over her left temple, but the undershot jaw and thick neck indicated that it would take more than one tap from a slungshot to disable her for any length of time.

Paul Pry knew that she had been a hostess in a speakeasy when her husband had started his meteoric rise to wealth. Now she strove to give an impression of culture.

"This here is the little woman herself," said Goldcrest. "And this, my dear, is George Crosby, the gentleman that telegraphed he would be interested in making us a handsome offer on our necklace."

The woman simpered. Paul Pry bowed low.

"It is indeed a pleasure and an honor, Mrs. Goldcrest. One who has the excellent taste to pick up a bit of rare jewelry is to be congratulated. Your loss is doubly unfortunate. Had the necklace been what I suspect it was, your photograph would have been on the front page of the daily papers within forty-eight hours. You would have been hailed as a lady of discernment and refinement. If you had sold, your name would have been mentioned in connection with that of a most prominent and wealthy gem collector."

The woman sighed, a sigh which rippled up the front of her dress like a miniature earthquake.

"Ain't that tough," she demanded. "That's just the sort of a break I was hoping for."

Paul Pry nodded.

"Well, something may turn up later. But you must promise me that you won't say a word about my mission here, or give my name to the newspapers."

"Sure, sure," soothed Goldcrest, "we promise."

But his wife was a little hesitant before she gave her promise.

"Yes, I guess so," she said. "Only couldn't we let it get out that you thought the necklace was a work of art and that I was a lady of taste and refinement?"

Paul Pry drew himself up in horror.

"No, no. My chief would dislike it very much if my mission here should be mentioned, now that the necklace is gone."

"I see," sighed Mrs. Goldcrest.

Paul Pry bowed low, muttered conventional protestations of pleasure, retrieved his hat, stick and coat and withdrew.

As the door slammed, Goldcrest looked at his wife.

"Rodney," said she in a voice that was filled with determination, "ring up the reporters an' tell 'em to beat it out here. Tell 'em we got a story for 'em."

Goldcrest lowered his eyes to the floor.

"We couldn't very well give 'em the publicity on this gem collector, dearie," he said.

The "little woman" tapped the floor with the ball of an impatient foot.

"Rodney," she rasped, "don't be foolish! Ring up those reporters!"

Paul Pry entered his room at the hotel and gazed at Mugs Magoo, sprawled on a chair, the telephone in his lap.

"Any calls?" asked Paul Pry.

"Nothing but."

"Newspapers?"

"Yeah. They tried all the old gags. Wanted George Crosby."

Paul Pry grinned.

"Give them any information?"

"Said you were out, didn't know when you'd come back."

"What did they ask?"

"What your business was, where you came from, how old you were, whether you were interested in purchasing the Goldcrest diamonds, whether you had any ideas for recovering the loot, whether it was true you'd put up a reward of twenty-five thousand dollars for the return of the diamonds, and a lot of other stuff I can't remember."

"They should be out here pretty quick."

"They will be. Want me to stick around?"

"No. There's a bottle of whiskey in that suitcase. Go on back to the apartment and wait until I give you a ring. A man didn't show up with a desk, did he?"

"Huh, a desk? Say, I thought that was part of the gags the

reporters were usin'. Sure. The porter said a desk had been delivered for you."

"That," said Paul Pry with a smile, "is different. Let's have the desk sent up."

It took precisely twenty minutes to get the desk trundled into the room. Paul Pry supervised the job of placing it to his satisfaction.

"What's the big idea?" asked Mugs Magoo when the porters had gone.

"Had a cabinet-maker working on it all afternoon," said Paul Pry. "Watch."

He grasped a corner of the desk, apparently a bit of solid wood, and pulled. The corner hinged upward and disclosed a secret drawer lying invitingly open.

"Good hiding place, eh?"

"Fine," said Mugs Magoo, "but what's it all about?"

Paul Pry placed his other hand beneath the desk and pushed. There was the sound of wood sliding on wood, and, before the startled eyes of Mugs Magoo, the secret drawer slid out of sight, and another secret drawer took its place.

"Well I'll be hanged."

Paul Pry only laughed. "You'll probably be waylaid by some reporters as you go out. Send 'em up."

Mugs Magoo nodded and left.

Five minutes later the reporters began to straggle into the room.

Paul Pry, under the name of George Crosby, secured wide publicity for his mission in town by insisting that the entire matter was a secret, and one that he did not care to discuss. He tried to be close-mouthed, but lost his temper and let certain admissions leak out. He threatened and cursed.

The result was that the morning papers contained the news that a well-known gem collector had had his attention called to the Goldcrest diamonds and had been on the point of paying a cool quarter of a million dollars for them when the robbery had taken place.

The paper mentioned that the agent of this collector, one George Crosby, was registered in room 6345 at the Bargemore Hotel, that he was deeply mysterious about his mission to the city, but did not deny that the necklace had been desired by a

prominent collector and that he had been commissioned to purchase it.

The same issue of the paper also contained a statement issued by Rodney Goldcrest that a ten thousand dollar reward would be paid for the return of the necklace, and no questions asked.

The police acted upon the assumption that the butler had not been as drunk as he had pretended, that he had had an accomplice, and that the accomplice had taken possession of the necklace.

Paul Pry read the various papers as he breakfasted in his room. A smile of serene satisfaction was on his face.

At ten-thirty his telephone rang. "This Mr. George Crosby?" asked a cautious voice.

"This is Mr. George Crosby," affirmed Paul Pry.

"You won't know my name, but I'd like to see you on a business matter."

"When?"

"Soon as possible."

"What was the name?"

"Simms, Sidney Simms."

"Never heard of you."

"You wouldn't have, but it'll be to your advantage to talk with me."

"Very well," said Paul Pry, after the manner of one reaching a decision on impulse, "I shall expect you in fifteen minutes."

"That's O.K.," said the other man, and slid the receiver back on its hook.

He was punctilious in his appointment. Fifteen minutes later to the second there sounded a furtive knock at Paul Pry's door.

Paul Pry flung it open.

"Mr. Simms?"

"Yeah. This is George Crosby, huh? Pleased t' meetcha."

And Sidney Simms glided into the room, much after the manner in which a snake glides down a rat hole.

He was tall and slender, this Sidney Simms, and he had great bat ears and bulging eyes. His huge mouth was twisted in a smile, and he wriggled his slender neck about in his collar.

"You had some business with me?" asked Paul Pry.

"Yeah. You're the chap that's the expert on gems, huh?"

"Not exactly an expert. I am interested in certain types of stones."

"Yeah. I know. Well, I've got a couple of diamonds I'd like to have you look over."

"But my dear man," protested Paul Pry, "I'm not in the business of appraising gems. My judgment might be utterly valueless. I would suggest that you step down to one of the wholesale jewelers."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," hissed Sidney Simms in his peculiar half whisper, "but just take a look at these babies!"

He rolled two diamonds out on the desk.

Paul Pry contemplated the gems with a face which registered intense interest.

"Very pleasing," he said, "very pleasing indeed, and quite interesting."

He reached for the stones.

Sidney Simms watched him with protruding eyes that had suddenly gone cold.

Paul Pry studied the stones.

"These," he announced at length, "have been in settings and then pried out."

Sidney Simms husked his answer in a cautious voice.

"That don't hurt 'em," he said.

Paul Pry nodded.

"Quite correct. However, the stones are not ones in which I would be interested. They are very ordinary diamonds of good quality. There is nothing distinctive in either gem or workmanship. My own interest is that of a collector. But thank you for coming."

Sidney Simms nodded, but made no other motion.

"You came on here to get the Goldcrest diamonds, eh?"

"That," said Paul Pry with dignity, "is, of course, a private matter."

"I was only going by what the newspapers said."

"The newspapers have assumed entirely too much liberty."

Sidney Simms leaned forward.

"S'pose you could get the Goldcrest diamonds."

Paul Pry sat back at his desk and put the tips of his fingers together.

"Now," he said, "I am interested."

"Yes," remarked Simms, his bat ears wriggling, "you should be."

Paul Pry said nothing.

"Suppose," went on Simms, "we go back to these two diamonds I'm showing you."

"What?" asked Paul Pry, "would you take for them?"

"Two hundred dollars."

"Apiece?"

"For both."

"That," said Paul Pry, "is approximately one half of their wholesale cost. It is either too much or too little."

Simms sat on the edge of a chair and thrust forward his long neck. The maneuver seemed to accentuate his bat ears and goggle eyes.

"Meaning what?" he demanded.

Paul Pry got up and went to the door. He flung it open, looked up and down the corridor. Then he closed and locked the door. He went to the windows, saw that each was tightly closed. Then he returned to his visitor.

"If the goods are legitimate, the price is too low. If they are hot the price is too high."

"Well," demanded Simms, upon whom no detail of the motions to insure secrecy had been lost, "s'pose they are hot. What then?"

"One hundred dollars," said Paul Pry with a snap to his words.

"They'd retail for close to a thousand," whined Simms.

"One hundred dollars. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it."

Paul Pry leaned forward. Before the goggle eyes of Sidney Simms, he pulled up the section of desk top, revealing the secret drawer. That secret drawer was crammed with rolled bank notes.

Paul Pry took out two fifty dollar bills and flipped them over, gathered in the two diamonds, dropped them carelessly in the drawer and replaced the desk top.

The goggle eyes took in every move.

"Pretty slick," said Simms.

"Yes. It's very well constructed."

"Listen, those diamonds are awful hot."

"I don't give a damn how hot they are."

Simms beamed at his host. "I guess," he observed, "we understand each other pretty well."

Paul Pry became all business.

"Those Goldcrest diamonds are worth precisely one hundred thousand dollars to me—in cash."

"Aw, the paper says they're worth two hundred and fifty thousand from a collector's standpoint—"

"And only worth that hundred thousand to me if they are of the finish and workmanship I have been led to believe."

Sidney Simms fidgeted.

"When could I talk with you?"

"At eight o'clock tonight."

"All right. I'll talk with you some more. I won't bring the diamonds, though. But I'll see some of the others and see what I can do."

Paul Pry got to his feet, held the outer door open.

"There will be one hundred thousand dollars in cold cash available in this room at precisely eight o'clock tonight. And I never wait more than five minutes on an appointment. Good-by, Mr. Simms."

And Sidney Simms wriggled through the door of the room, into the corridor.

"I'll be there," he husked.

What followed was simple. Paul Pry dropped down to the lobby and engaged a white-whiskered gentleman in conversation. The conversation turned to prohibition, whiskey. Paul Pry mentioned casually that he had a shipment of pre-war stuff which he had been fortunate enough to secure from sources of unquestionable integrity. The whiskey was smooth as oil.

The white-whiskered gentleman became greatly interested. He wished very, very much that he could secure some of this same shipment.

Paul Pry took out a notebook, quoted a price, jotted down a figure.

"The name's George Crosby," he said. "Be at room 6345 at precisely three minutes past eight tonight. I won't get the stuff ready for delivery until eight. My partner is calling on me."

The white-whiskered gentleman mumbled his thanks.

Paul Pry noticed that a square-toed man with a bull neck had

seemed rather interested in the conversation, particularly after he took out his notebook.

He moved to another part of the lobby, engaged a slender man with mournful eyes in conversation. The conversation turned to prohibition and the terrible quality of recent whiskey. From that point on the conversation was the same as the other.

The bull-necked man with the square-toed shoes became exceedingly interested when Paul Pry made another notation in his notebook and moved away.

He sat down next to a horse-faced man who was absorbed in a newspaper and borrowed a match. The horse-faced one looked up, gave the match, made some comment. The comment started a conversation. The conversation turned to prohibition and the quality of whiskey.

At the close of the conversation, Paul Pry snapped his notebook back into his pocket and walked out to the street, gazed up and down, and entered a cab.

He was gone for several hours. When he returned, the bell captain found occasion to brush against him.

"I've got the house," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Paul Pry, speaking, however, in a carefully lowered tone.

"You know what I mean. If you do anything in the house get your stuff through me."

Paul Pry appeared to consider.

"You," he said, "can go to hell." And he walked off.

At precisely three minutes to eight a delivery truck drove up to the freight entrance and the porter receipted for several bulky packages for George Crosby, in room 6345.

The porter's palm had been well greased, and the bulky packages came up. They were placed in the room, the placing being accomplished with great care.

At eight one Sidney Simms wriggled through the door.

"Well?" he asked. His goggle eyes lit on the packages.

Paul Pry walked over to the desk. "A little shipment," he said.

There came a banging on the door panel. Paul Pry frowned. Sidney Simms darted a hand under his coat.

"Open in the name of the law!" boomed a voice.

Paul Pry gave a gasp, muttered an oath and reached the door with swift strides.

Sidney Simms hesitated for a mere fraction of a second. Then, as Paul Pry's back was turned, he lifted the top of the desk, disclosing the secret drawer, now crammed full of rolled currency, and dropped in a diamond necklace that glittered with sparkling brilliancy as it dropped into the secret drawer. He put back the desk top and was standing well away from the desk when the officers entered.

"What in hell's the meaning of this outrage?" demanded Paul Pry.

"You know, George Crosby," boomed one of the officers. "You have in your possession a large quantity of illegal liquor."

"Oh," said Paul Pry, and seemed relieved.

And Sidney Simms, standing with folded arms, the tips of his fingers touching the butts of twin automatics, heaved a sigh and grinned.

"What's in those boxes?" asked the officer.

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't opened them."

"Well, I will," snorted the officer in charge.

They opened the boxes in a most thorough manner. The boxes were filled with bottles. The bottles bore whiskey labels and were filled with an amber liquid.

"Guess we've got you dead to rights," said the officer. "Who are you?" he demanded, turning to Sidney Simms.

"Why this guy met me on the street and got to talking about some fine liquor he had. I don't even know his name. He said for me to come on up and he'd give me a sample. Here, officer, here's my card. Maybe you'd better know who I am."

The officer moved toward Simms belligerently.

"You bet I'd better know who you are!"

Simms led the way to a corner and whispered. The officer grunted his surprise, and inspected certain documents which Sidney Simms took from an inner pocket. Those documents were clearly convincing. He nodded his head.

"O.K., men," he said.

One of the raiders had opened one of the bottles.

"Hell," he said, "this here is nothing but colored water!"

The chief crossed the room with quick strides.

"What!"

"It's a fact!"

And during that interval of excitement, Paul Pry managed to unobtrusively work the slide which switched the location of the secret drawers in the desk.

There was the sound of wood sliding over wood, a click as something dropped into place. But those sounds were swallowed in the exclamations of the raiding officers.

"It's no crime to have colored water in your possession, is it, officer?" asked Paul Pry, and winked at Simms.

The officer emitted a roar.

"No. But it's a crime to try and sell it, and that's what you were doing!"

"In that event," suggested Paul Pry, "you should have waited in the hall until I had sold the water and taken money for it. Your raid was predicated on the theory of possession, I believe."

The officer in charge straightened, clenched his fists, surveyed Paul Pry with a face that was mottled in anger.

"It's a damned lucky break for you," he said. "You bought this stuff thinking it was good whiskey. You got gyped on the whiskey, but you got saved a stiff fine and a jail sentence on the strength of it."

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders.

"Says you," he retorted impudently.

"Says me," bellowed the officer, "and you're going down to the station with us and do some explaining. That wise crack of yours is going to cost you a ride in a police wagon, and a charge of vagrancy and a chance to make bail!"

He moved toward Paul Pry with slow, purposeful steps.

"And I hope you resist an officer," he added, almost as an afterthought.

But Paul Pry held out docile wrists.

"I'm sorry, officer," he said.

"You will be," snapped the head of the raiding party.

"Want this evidence, chief?"

"Yes. Bring along a couple of bottles from each case. Turn out the lights and let's go."

And in the confusion incident to departure, Sidney Simms managed to leave his hat. It was not until the door was locked that he remembered it.

"I left my hat," he whispered to the raiding officer.

That individual passed over the key.

"All right, make it snappy."

Sidney Simms made it snappy.

He glided to the door, unlocked it, wriggled into the room, scooped up his hat with one gesture, and flipped up the section of desk top with another.

He fished out a string of glittering objects, dropped them into his pocket. Then he scooped out the rolls of currency, chuckling the while.

"Just too bad," he muttered. "Crosby gets skinned all around."

He dropped the section back over the drawer, walked to the door, wriggled through it and turned the key. He met the raiders at the elevator. He left them at the lobby.

At the entrance to the hotel, a police car was parked. About it a curious crowd was gathered.

"Officer," begged Paul Pry, "will you let me explain this matter? You're letting a criminal get away—"

"Shut up!" snapped the officer.

Paul Pry meekly subsided. He was hustled through the swinging doors, out to the sidewalk. The door of the police car opened to receive him, and then a gruff voice from the sidewalk halted all proceedings.

"Here, what's this?"

The raiders turned to confront Inspector Quigley.

"Booze raid," said the officer in charge, saluting.

"Why, look here, this man is Paul Pry. He had an appointment with me to recover the Goldcrest necklace. There's some mistake—"

Paul Pry's voice cut through the sudden silence.

"Not at all, inspector. I tried to explain to this man, but he wouldn't listen. I told him he was letting a criminal escape, but—"

The raider ran a nervous finger about the neckband of his collar.

"Come inside!" roared Inspector Quigley.

Back in Paul's room, Paul seemed apologetic.

"Of course I couldn't say anything in front of the criminal or he'd have started to shoot his way out, and I wasn't absolutely certain he had the necklace. But perhaps, inspector, if you'll get

these bungling officers out of here we might recover the necklace, even if we have lost the real criminal."

Quigley frowned at the open-mouthed men.

"Get out," he said. They got out.

Paul Pry approached the desk, flipped up the section of the top. A drawer was disclosed, a drawer that was empty, stripped of its contents as clean as a whistle.

"Humph!" said Inspector Quigley.

Paul Pry reached under the top of the desk and pulled a lever. The empty drawer slid smoothly along greased skids with just a faint sound of wood rubbing against wood. Another drawer clicked into place. That drawer was filled with money and, on top of the rolled currency, was a string of glittering objects that caught the light of the room and sent forth scintillations of brilliant fire.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Inspector Quigley, picking up the diamonds. "I'll be damned."

He looked at them carefully.

"It's the string all right. Pry, there's something funny about this."

"Is there?"

"You know damned well there is. This necklace would have brought them about twenty thousand if they peddled it to a fence. It cost eighty thousand at retail. And I find it here where you apparently talked some criminal into leaving it."

"Tricked some criminal into leaving it, inspector."

"Well?"

"Well, inspector, there's a reward of ten thousand dollars for the recovery of that necklace. I'm not a hog. You take the necklace and the credit. You take half the reward. I take the other half."

Inspector Quigley sat down on the edge of the desk.

"You know, Pry, there's just a chance you were mixed in this thing. This is the third or fourth big reward you've recovered. Better come clean."

Paul Pry grinned.

"Sure," he said.

And, Paul Pry told the entire story from the time he found Gilvray's man shadowing the butler.

"But," muttered Inspector Quigley, when Paul had finished his

story, "we can't get a conviction purely on your testimony, especially since you posed as an accomplice."

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"We can get five thousand dollars reward money apiece, inspector. And I'm just as glad we can't pin anything on the Gilvray gang."

"Why?"

"They're my meal ticket, the goose that lays my golden eggs."

Inspector Quigley sighed.

"You," he said, "will be pushing up daisies if you keep on."

Paul Pry merely laughed.

The newspapers made much of the recovery of the Goldcrest diamonds. There was, it seemed, a great deal of credit due to Inspector Quigley. Also there was credit in an undisclosed amount due to an amateur who had posed as George Crosby, a gem collector, and trapped the criminals into dealing with him.

Unfortunately, the criminals had escaped, but the police expected to make arrests. The reward money would be paid. The necklace had been recovered.

Paul Pry read the papers and chuckled. Mugs Magoo read them and grunted. Inspector Quigley read them and a satisfied smile oozed from the corners of his mouth. At his palatial residence in the exclusive suburban district, Benjamin Franklin Gilvray, known in the underworld as Big Front Gilvray, read the papers and cursed.

Upon the table in front of him reposed one paste imitation necklace, five rolls of bills. Each roll of bills was backed by a fifty dollar bank note. The interior of each roll consisted of fifty one dollar bills. The total was the exact amount Big Front Gilvray's gang had to divide as the result of a carefully planned coup.

Big Front Gilvray drew a piece of paper to him. Using his left hand, a coarse pencil, and printing the words so they would not betray him, he wrote a message to Paul Pry. The message read:

> I KNOW NOW THE GUY TO DEAL WITH. YOU BEEN DROPPING MONKEY WRENCHES IN MY MACHINERY LONG ENOUGH AND YOU'RE GOING TO PUSH UP DAISIES.

Big Front Gilvray summoned a member of his gang.

"See that this gets slipped under the door of this guy Pry's apartment," he said. "We'll give him a chance to get out of town."

The gangster's face distorted with rage.

"You just say the word, boss, and we'll put him on the spot and—"

"No," said Big Front Gilvray. "We've always avoided the rough stuff, and we'll give this guy a break. But it's a temptation to ventilate him with a Tommy. Think of all the trouble we went to!"

The other man's face purpled.

"God yes! We took moving pictures of the damned butler so we could study his every gesture. We had Delano strutting around the streets copying his walk. We had to plant Mabel in the house to slip the drug in the cocktail. We had to—"

"Shut up!" snapped Gilvray. "Get started."

The subordinate choked off his words and got started.

Precisely two hours later a collect telegram came for B. F. Gilvray. Thinking it related to some of his numerous liquor shipments, the arch-gangster paid the toll, receipted for the telegram and slitted the yellow envelope.

His incredulous eyes read the answer to his anonymous note.

THANKS FOR THE REWARD. YOU ARE A GREAT MEAL TICKET. PULL SOMETHING ELSE, I NEED THE DOUGH.

(Signed) THE DAISY-PUSHER.

Wiker Gets the Works

"Quick, get a squad here," Paul Pry breathed into the transmitter. "There's a gangster hiding in my clothes closet with a machine gun, waiting to shoot me." And even as he spoke he stared straight into the empty closet. No, Paul Pry wasn't cuckoo. His eyes were glittering slits of concentration as he laid the beginnings of his crafty trap.

Paul Pry's piercing eyes stared into the glassy orbs of "Mugs" Magoo, the man who never forgot a face.

"So I'm to be put on the spot, eh, Mugs?"

Mugs Magoo, one-armed, ragged, unshaven, reached for the bottle of whiskey. His glassy eyes never left Paul Pry's face.

"I'll say! I warned you, warned you fifty times. Now it's come, just like I said it would."

Paul Pry crossed the room to a closet which was filled with drums. He selected a favorite, a Hopi ceremonial drum, sat down with the wooden cylinder between his knees and tapped the taut rawhide with a stick of juniper at the end of which was a padded ball of buckskin.

There boomed forth a muffled pulsation of sound, a deep, resonant sound in which there was mingled a vibration of that which is utterly savage and untamed.

"Warned me?" he asked, almost dreamily.

"I'll say! Not once but fifty times. Remember, before that last job I told you. I was sitting right here in this room, and I told you

if you kept on monkeying with 'Big Front' Gilvray, he'd have you bumped. And what did you do? Went out and copped the Goldcrest necklace after the Gilvray gang had spent weeks trying to pull the job. You got Inspector Quigley to turn in the necklace for the reward, but that didn't fool Gilvray none. He knew who upset his apple cart."

Paul Pry ceased his drumming and grinned. There was something boyishly appealing about that grin, yet his eyes were hard as twin diamonds.

"And Gilvray sent me a note telling me I'd soon be pushing daisies," he said.

"I'll say!" agreed Mugs Magoo, without enthusiasm. "Why you couldn't have pulled your stuff with different gangs is more than I know. But you had to keep after Big Front Gilvray. Every time he pulled a job you slicked him out of the sway and copped a reward. No crook's going to stand for that racket."

And Mugs Magoo, shifting his glassy gaze from Paul Pry's face to the whiskey bottle, hesitated, reached toward the bottle, sighed, withdrew his hand, sighed again and grabbed the bottle.

Paul Pry, his diamond eyes unblinking, snapped a question at his accomplice.

"Precisely," he demanded, "what is the reason for your latest prophecy of doom?"

Mugs Magoo poured the whiskey into the glass.

"'Woozy' Wiker," he said, then, after an interval, added, "from Chicago."

Paul Pry laughed, and his laugh contained no note of apprehension. It was the laugh of one who derives nothing but enjoyment from life.

"Woozy Wiker? Really, Mugs, your friends do have the most delightful names! First it's Benjamin Franklin Gilvray, who's known as Big Front Gilvray because he likes to throw a big front. Now it's Woozy Wiker! How does the estimable Mr. Wiker get his nickname?"

Mugs Magoo shook his head doggedly.

"Go ahead and laugh if you want to. I'll tell the undertaker to pinch up your cheeks into a grin so you'll look natural."

Paul Pry's laugh died into a chuckle.

"Come on, Mugs, be a sport. Have another drink if you must, but tell me about Woozy Wiker, from Chicago."

Mugs Magoo regarded the whiskey bottle with a dour eye, sighed, shook his head, gazed at his empty glass, and then shifted his eyes to Paul Pry's face.

"Woozy Wiker puts 'em on the spot," he said. "He can pretend he's drunk better than any guy in the world. When he's working up a job he likes to act like he's plastered. But he's deadly. He bumped off Harry Higley, though they never proved it on him. He got Martha the Moll on the spot after she was suspected of telling the police all about the Dugan murder. They never even arrested him for that, but they know."

Paul Pry tapped a few gentle notes on the drum.

"And now Big Front Gilvray has sent for him?"

"Yeah. He's here. I seen him on the street this morning. Him an' Gilvray was together. I tell you the Gilvray gang's getting desperate. They used to be high-class workers that went in for slick stuff. You've been copping the gravy from their jobs and now they've got violent."

Paul Pry nodded cheerfully.

"And they got Woozy Wiker, the one man who can pretend to be woozy, eh, Mugs?"

"I'll say! And that ain't all they've got. Did you read about the Marple hold-up?"

"Marple— Marple—let's see, Mugs, wasn't that the hold-up that was pulled yesterday afternoon? They killed an officer, I believe."

Mugs Magoo sighed as he glanced at the whiskey bottle, then at his empty glass, and turned toward Paul Pry.

"That's the one," he said. "That cop never stood a chance."

"Why?" asked Paul Pry, his eyes glittering with sudden interest.

"Because he didn't know what he was up against."

"Well, Mugs, what *was* he up against?"

"He was up against Woozy Wiker's armored car, that's what. Remember the newspapers said there was a gray Cadillac that took the bandits from the hold-up? And that this motorcycle cop took after 'em and there was a gun battle?"

Paul Pry nodded. "Go on, Mugs."

Mugs turned his glassy eyes back to the whiskey bottle, poured himself another drink.

"That gray Cadillac is Woozy's private car. It's built especially

for hold-up jobs. The body ain't thin metal. It's regular armor. The windows are all of bullet-proof glass."

Paul Pry whistled.

Mugs Magoo tossed off the drink and nodded somberly.

"Yep. That's the lay. Woozy Wiker comes on from Chicago and throws in with Gilvray. They go in for violence. And they'll make a lead mine out of you as a side line. I thought of Woozy when I read of the gray Cadillac. Then this morning I seen him an' Gilvray together."

Paul Pry took up the juniper drumstick.

"And you think they're going after me?"

"I don't think it. I know it. You got a date with a wooden kimono—an' I ain't foolin'."

Paul Pry's stick beat the drum faster and faster. His eyes glittered with diamond-hard concentration, and the ghost of a smile played around the corners of his mouth.

"Mugs," he said, dreamily.

Mugs frowned irritably.

"If you're goin' to say something, lay off beating that damn drum. I can't hear."

Paul Pry lowered the force of his strokes. The drum throbbed to muffled cadences which were barely audible.

"No, Mugs. I like the drum. I think it's a war drum. I'm not certain, but it's got a savage hum to it. Can't you visualize a big fire in the night, dancing feet, war paint, shaking spears, savage wails—"

Mugs Magoo interrupted.

"No. I can't. I can't visualize nothing except machine guns spattering lead, a black hearse, a big funeral, and a meal ticket that's pushing up daisies. What am I going to do for whiskey after you're gone?"

Paul Pry laughed outright.

"Spoken like a man, Mugs! No false mush of maudlin sentiment, no blah over lost friendship. To you I'm a meal ticket. Your interest is purely selfish. And, after all, that's life—if we were only frank enough to admit it."

"Aw, chief, I didn't mean it that way. But I was sure down and out until you came along. Since then things have been too good to last. I knew there'd be a wind-up."

Paul Pry set the drum to the floor and centered his gaze upon Mugs Magoo.

"Mugs, if you'll give up drinking, I can get you back on the force as camera-eye man!"

Mugs waved his empty sleeve.

"Not with one arm gone."

"Yes. Even with one arm gone. You're invaluable as a camera-eye man, and I can land the job for you."

Mugs Magoo regarded the whiskey bottle, took a deep breath.

"Nope. There ain't no use. I know myself better'n anybody else. I got kicked off the force for booze before this arm went bye-bye. I can't lay off the stuff, and I'm finished trying. I went down until I was selling pencils in the street, and then you came along, found out about my knack of remembering faces and connections and put me to work spotting gangsters for you. I'm good for that—an' that's all. But you were goin' to tell me something when we got started arguing about that drum. I know from the way you looked and the way you spoke sort of dreamy like. What were you going to spill?"

Paul Pry tapped the arm of the chair with drumming fingers.

"Remember the girl who had her diamonds switched at Forman's?"

Mugs Magoo nodded. "She claimed that's what happened. She didn't have no proof."

Paul Pry's eyes were diamond hard now. His lips were unsmiling.

"True. She didn't have proof. But I believed her, and you believed her, Mugs."

"Well, even if I did, what of it? We couldn't do anything."

"I have her name and address, Mugs."

"Well, what's all this got to do with Woozy Wiker?"

"Just this, Mugs. Suppose the Gilvray gang should pull a hold-up where Forman lost a lot of jewels, and suppose I should recover those jewels and stick Forman for a big reward. And suppose, further, that I should give the girl a cut from the reward! Don't you think that would be justice all around?"

Mugs Magoo paused with his hand halfway to the whiskey bottle. His glassy eyes were wide with alarm.

"For God's sake, ch ef, don't go getting any crazy notion into your head like that! You've got to find a hole to crawl in, and

then pull the hole in after you. You've gotta lay low until after Woozy Wiker gets done. Even then you'll have a hell of a time; but maybe you can make it.

"That's what I came around for. I've got a hideout staked out for you. You'll have to stay in your room night and day, and have your meals sent in, and you'll have to have a body-guard, but maybe you can last it out. Gilvray's got enemies. He ain't going to last forever. But this business of trying to collect any more rewards— Gosh, chief, you're nutty!"

Paul Pry shook his head, a single swift shake of negation.

"Woozy Wiker doesn't know me, of course."

"No. But he'll get someone to point you out. That's easy."

"But suppose I should beat him to the punch and get you to point him out to me, first?"

"What good would that do?"

"It might do a lot. You admit the Gilvray gang is hard up for ready money. That robbery yesterday proves that. Wiker will go after the big gems first. I'm sort of a side issue."

Mugs Magoo sighed.

"Yeah. Harry Higley was sort of a side issue. So was Martha the Moll. They're both of 'em pushing daisies. This guy Wiker is tough, I'm telling you."

Paul Pry nodded, but his eyes had ceased to be glittering hard. There was a look of dreamy concentration about them, and when he spoke his voice was soft, almost crooning.

"I could let my beard grow for a day, and plaster powder on my face. That would make it seem as though I had just shaved off a heavy beard."

"What good would that do?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"It would make me look more like a Russian."

"Like a Russian! For God's sake, chief, have you gone cuckoo?"

"Like a Russian," went on Paul Pry, heedless of the interruption, "who would be likely to bring the unsold crown jewels of Russia to this country for sale."

Mugs Magoo took the whiskey bottle, held it to the light, regarded it dubiously, then shook his head.

"Nope," he said, "it's only half gone. That ain't enough to make me drunk. But I'm either drunk or you're crazy. And I can't

get drunk any more on half a quart of whiskey, even if it is before breakfast!"

But Paul Pry was on his feet, moving with the swift efficiency of an athlete.

"Where can we contact Woozy Wiker?" he asked.

Mugs shook his head. "That's easy. How can we keep from contacting him?"

"You know where we can find him?"

"Sure."

Paul Pry reached for his hat.

"Come on, Mugs," he said.

It was mid-morning. The shopping district showed an occasional burst of life. For the most part it was peopled with stragglers, advance guard of the rush which was to come in the later hours.

The banks bustled with ordered activity. Well-dressed business men came and went. It was the hour when the city prepares itself to worship the great god, business.

Mugs Magoo sat sprawled against the wall of a bank. In his lap was a hat, filled with pencils. A few coins jingled against the black felt. Upon his face was exactly that expression of weariness which must ever be affected by the beggars of life. His empty sleeve dangled where it was in plain sight of the casual observer.

The glassy eyes, the unshaven countenance, the ragged clothes, the sprawled figure were all typical of the street beggars who plays upon the emotions of the sympathetic passerby.

So perfectly did he act his part, that no one could notice that the glassy eyes surveyed each face, that the hand twisting and turning the hat, extending it at times in a gesture of invitation, was really giving a series of signals.

Paul Pry, lounging at well-dressed, indolent ease upon the opposite corner, had opportunity to see every signal and to interpret those signals.

For Mugs Magoo never forgot a face, and he knew the characters of the underworld as no other man. Once let him spot a face, and he would instantly remember it even though he saw it the second time after a lapse of ten years, and in another city.

Paul Pry watched the hat which was manipulated by Mugs Magoo's hand, and knew much of the people who hurried by. He knew that a prosperous appearing individual was a gambler, that

a man who looked like a banker was a stick-up artist, that an innocent appearing girl was the active end of a badger team.

But these things held no interest for him.

Then, as a thin individual with swiftly nervous steps walked the pavement as lightly as a cat, Mugs Magoo tilted his hat.

Paul Pry gave a flip to his polished walking stick and strolled in the same direction as that taken by the slender individual with the catlike steps.

Mugs Magoo put his pencils in his pocket, cupped the coins in his hand and clamped the hat on his head, then looked about him for a street car. His duties for the day were over.

The man with the restless eyes, the nervous feet and the hatchet profile was Woozy Wiker—from Chicago.

Wiker went into the bank. In his hand was a satchel, and, as he walked, he held to that satchel with a grip that whitened the skin over his knuckles.

He walked to the window over which appeared a gilt sign bearing the message "R to Z." Paul Pry strolled to the same window, and his manner was excited.

Wiker was at the head of the line, but Paul Pry darted forward with a nervous excitability and insinuated himself in the line of half a dozen people, directly in front of the gangster.

"Parrrdon!" said Paul Pry, speaking with an accent that matched his nervous manner. "I was here. I go away for one minute, one second. You come and take my place."

"Say-y-y-y!" growled the gangster, his bony jaw thrust forward, his right hand holding the satchel well behind him.

"And I only want to ask a question, for one minute, my friend, one little question, but an important question. The safety of one million dollars depends on that question."

The hostility faded from the gangster's eyes.

"Yeah?" he said, and his tone was filled with cautious interest.

Paul nodded with nervous excitability.

"One second it takes, and that is all."

"Go to it, guy," said Woozy Wiker, and stood back slightly that Paul Pry might be assured of his place in the line.

Paul Pry was well dressed, but his face had the peculiar hue of a man who has but recently shaved a beard. There was a certain unfamiliarity with his surroundings in his manner which a shrewd

observer would have noticed. And Woozy Wiker was a shrewd observer.

The line transacted its business with swift rapidity. These were business men who knew exactly what to do. Their checks were properly endorsed. Their deposit slips were written neatly and accurately. The teller was able to scan the figures, mark totals, smile, and reach for the next deposit.

Paul Pry came to the window. Behind him the gangster, holding tightly to his satchel, bent his head slightly forward and to one side, the better to listen.

Paul Pry regarded the face of the teller through the wicketed window, and made a swift gesture with his hands, the gesture of a man of foreign mannerisms.

"Parrdon!" he said.

"Well?" said the teller, noticing that Paul Pry's hands bore no check, no deposit, no currency.

"Forman, the jeweler, is he trustworthy? Can he be trusted with gems that are worth a million, a million and a half? Gems that—that came from Russia?"

The teller regarded Paul Pry with the stare of a man whose mind has been hopelessly crowded with routine and suddenly is confronted by something utterly unusual.

"Forman—Forman— Say, what's the idea?"

Paul Pry lowered his voice.

"Certain very valuable jewels are to be shown to a customer. He wants them left with Forman for examination. But I must not take chances. This Forman, is he honest?"

The teller glanced swiftly toward the uniformed figure which patrolled the marble flagged floor in stately impressiveness—the majestic dignity of the law.

"You're at the wrong window," he said. Then his eye caught that of the special officer. His hand beckoned.

"But I only ask for the single answer, is he honest or is he not?" insisted Paul Pry.

The special officer moved forward swiftly.

"Why come here?" parried the teller, sparring for time.

"Because he said I should inquire at his bank."

And the teller laughed.

"Oh," he said.

At that moment the officer arrived.

"This gentleman," said the teller, "is a foreigner. He evidently is looking for one of the vice presidents. Will you take him to Mr. Adams? He has a question to ask. It's quite all right, Jamison. Just see that he gets in touch with Mr. Adams."

And Paul Pry, shrugging his shoulders in a quick gesture of nervous excitement, was escorted to the offices at the other end of the bank. The line shuffled forward, and Woozy Wiker, from Chicago, lifted the satchel to the window.

"Please count that and make a deposit," he said.

The special officer grasped Paul Pry firmly by the arm, and escorted him to the office of Arthur Adams, the first vice president.

The question which Paul Pry asked of Mr. Adams was not the same question which he had asked the teller at the wicketed window. It was a routine question dealing with the use of certain foreign bonds for a short-time loan, and the question was answered with cold cordiality; the cordiality which a bank exhibits toward a prospective depositer, the coldness which bankers generally reserve for prospective borrowers.

Paul Pry bowed his thanks and left the office.

Woozy Wiker was waiting for him at the entrance.

"Get the information?" he asked.

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders.

"Information! Bah! They are afraid, these bankers, to answer questions. Understand, I have a mission, a trust. I am to raise one million dollars for the Bolshevik government. I am a special emissary. I mind my own business, and I ask that others mind theirs. I obey the laws of the country in which I am, and I ask that my own be respected.

"Certain very valuable things are to be exhibited to a customer. The customer says that these things are to be left at Forman's for his inspection. Cannot give a jeweler a million dollars without knowing that he is all right. I must find out. And the bank thinks that I am crazy because I ask. It is a strange country to me, yet I have lived in it as a child."

Woozy Wiker nodded sympathetically.

"I guess Forman is all right," he said.

Paul Pry nodded. "That is what the bank says," he explained volubly. "But before they will say for sure there is so much red

tape that I must unwind, just to find out if a man is honest or if he is not honest."

"What," asked Wiker, "led you to come to the window where that teller was located—I mean the window R to Z?"

Paul Pry's eyes were twinkling with cunning.

"Am I a fool?" he said. "Before all the other windows was a big line. I looked them over. I asked the first man I could reach. I knew that he would then direct me to the proper man to answer me. And I thank you for your courtesy, and I must go at once to get some very valuable things to take to this Alexander Forman who is honest. They must be there at four o'clock this afternoon."

Woozy Wiker fell into step with him. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Poof!" said Paul Pry, and darted away into the stream of traffic as a wary trout darts from the shadow of a fisherman. There was the slamming of a taxicab door, and Woozy Wiker was left standing on the pavement, regarding the place where Paul Pry had been standing.

The lead-colored eyes of Woozy Wiker were filmed with thought.

Paul Pry went directly to a store which made a specialty of selling odd pets. The aisles were lined with cages from which were emitted various squawks, screams, catcalls and odors.

"I want a large rat," he said.

"White?" the attendant asked indifferently.

"I would prefer more of a domestic color."

"You mean a dun?"

"Yes."

"I'll see what we have."

"And it should be an active rat, one that is naturally inclined to be restless."

"Just a minute," said the clerk in a tone of wearied patience.

He was gone some three minutes and emerged from the tangled piles of cages in the rear with a small wire cage. In it were two large rats.

"These are known as pack rats. They are very large, and very restless."

Paul Pry produced a bill fold.

"I will take them both," he said briskly. "They are exactly what I have been looking for."

Five minutes later he emerged from the store with a bulky package under his arm and sought another taxicab. This time he went directly to a place which specialized in safes. There were huge wall safes, small portable safes, strong boxes, bond containers, fireproof filing cabinets.

A clerk regarded him with professional affability.

"I want," said Paul Pry, "a metal lock box that will resist any attempt at opening it for about five minutes."

The clerk's affability vanished under an expression of wide-eyed astonishment.

"Five minutes?" he asked.

"Five minutes of protection," assured Paul Pry.

"Yes, sir. And how big a box?"

"Oh, one that's about big enough to hold a million dollars' worth of crown jewels."

"Huh," gulped the clerk. "Why you'd want one of our special burglar-proof, torch-proof, tamper-proof—"

Paul Pry interrupted. "I want a metal container that will last for just about five minutes," he said.

The clerk wilted under the diamond-hard glitter of Paul Pry's eyes.

"Yes, sir," he said, and moved with such swift alacrity that it was less than ten minutes later when Paul Pry walked from the store and summoned another cab. This time he had two packages under his arm.

Mugs Magoo was sitting in Paul Pry's apartment when that individual returned with his strange purchases. There was an empty whiskey bottle on the table; another one beside it showed but half full.

Mugs Magoo's glassy eyes regarded Paul Pry lugubriously.

"You still here?"

"Where did you think I'd be?" asked Paul Pry.

"Pushin' daisies," said Mugs.

Paul grinned, unwrapped his purchases, set on the table the cage containing the huge rats, the lock box which was almost a young safe; almost, but not quite.

Mugs Magoo nodded gravely.

"Quite all right," he said.

"What's quite all right, Mugs?"

"You acting this way—now."

"What do you mean, now."

"I mean before you started to act goofy I wasn't cockeyed enough to be drunk, and it showed that one of us was going crazy, and I don't want to go crazy—not right now. But this time I'm just plastered enough so it all seems quite natural. That's why I'm going to take another drink, and ain't even going to ask you are they really rats in that cage or are they the beginnings of me going goofy." And Mugs Magoo poured himself another drink.

Paul Pry regarded the rats, gazing at him with black eyes and inquisitive whiskers. Their restless paws scratched at the bars of the cage.

"Mugs," he said, "it has been observed that everything contains, within itself, the seeds of its own destruction."

Mugs Magoo tossed off the drink.

"Uh-huh."

"Apparently you're not impressed."

"Whatcha want me to do? Fall on your neck and weep?" asked the glassy-eyed Mugs Magoo. "I know that. I can't wrap up the idea in the same high-soundin' words that you used, but I can tell you the same thing. Ain't I been preachin' it for a long time? I told you you'd get yourself put on a marble slab, picking on Big Front Gilvray and copping the swag as fast as he got it.

"You've been pretty successful. You've picked up around twenty thousand dollars in reward money, net to you. And you've carried it too far. It's this seeds of destruction business you're talking about. You been too successful. If you'd missed once or twice, Gilvray would just be annoyed. But you've got him where he's got to bump you off to keep in business."

Paul Pry laughed.

"Well reasoned, Mugs. He's got to bump me off to keep in business. I don't intend to be bumped off. Therefore, he's got to quit business.

"But what I had reference to, Mugs, was another matter. I mentioned that everything contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. I was referring to the scheme of holding up business places in an armored car with bullet-proof windows."

"Huh," remarked Mugs Magoo, "that don't contain no seeds

of destruction. It's got the Chicago cops paralyzed. They can't do nothing. A bus that looks like an ordinary touring car turns out to be a fort. A copper chases 'em and gets sprayed with lead, and don't have a chance. They're sitting behind bullet-proof windows, and giving him the works, and laughing at him all the while they're doing it."

Paul Pry nodded enigmatically.

"Yet there's one factor, one particular factor that is the weak point in the entire scheme. That car has to be operated in a certain manner in order to be effective."

"Well, what's the answer?" asked Mugs, his bleary eyes peering at Paul Pry.

"There isn't any—yet. But there will be some time this afternoon—if the police will do what I rather expect they will."

Mugs Magoo poured another drink.

"Aw, go push daisies," he said. Then after an interval, "What you counting on the police doing?"

"That," said Paul Pry, "is where I want your opinion. You have been a police officer, and you know police psychology. Suppose there was a desperate gangster hidden in that closet, ready to shoot me down with a machine gun, and suppose I managed to notify the police. What would they do?"

Mugs Magoo let his bleary eyes rest upon Paul Pry's countenance.

"You mean what'd the gangster do while you were doing all that?"

"No. What would the police do?"

"After they got here?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tell the coroner to come and sweep up the remains."

"No. I mean if the gangster was still in the closet."

Mugs snorted.

"Oh, that! Well, in my time they'd send one man to bust open the closet door and slam that baby to the hoosegow, and if the gangster got tough, he'd have a face that looked like a hamburger steak. But them times have passed. Now they'd send a squad with tear bombs and machine guns and riot shotguns, and they'd keep well back out of the way and bang lots of tear bombs into the room until they smoked out the bandit. Then they'd take him to the station and he'd be a hero to all the other gangsters. Half

an hour later a judge would slam his fist on a habeas corpus for some slick lawyer that voted for him last election. Then the case would never come to trial."

Paul Pry nodded, walked to the telephone, called the police headquarters.

"Quick," he breathed into the transmitter, his voice low, but fairly trembling with excitement, "this is Paul Pry. You know the gangs have threatened to get me. Well, there's a gangster in the closet of my room with a machine gun, waiting for me to come into the other room so he can shoot me. Get a squad here quick. But don't take any chances. He's desperate. He's got a machine gun and a thousand rounds of ammunition."

And Paul Pry hung up the telephone.

Mugs Magoo poured himself a drink, looked longingly at the bottle, and returned it to the sideboard. With the stately dignity which comes only to those who are carrying their liquor as gentlemen should, he stalked toward the door.

"Going, Mugs?"

"Yep. You're pulling another fast one, and I don't want to be in on it. Remember that stuff about the seeds of destruction? Well, you've got 'em, right in here."

And Mugs Magoo tapped his forehead with a significant forefinger, picked up his hat, opened the door, slammed it and walked firmly down the corridor.

Paul Pry regarded him with a grin, then turned to the closet. From it he took a miscellaneous assortment of old clothes and shoes, and stored them in another closet. Then he took some walnuts and placed them on the floor of the closet. He crumpled a newspaper, tossed it in. Next he liberated the two rats in the closet and closed the door.

Ten minutes later the police arrived.

Paul Pry met them at the door on tiptoe, his eyes wide and startled.

"He's in there," he said, and pointed.

The sergeant led his men into the room. As Mugs Magoo had predicted, they were armed to the teeth and carried a basket of tear-gas bombs.

"Who is it?" whispered the officer.

"I don't know. I came in and heard him in there. He doesn't know I'm here. He's waiting—listen."

And Paul Pry, freezing into an attitude of tense attention, held the others in rigid silence. A second passed, two seconds, ten seconds. One of the officers stirred.

Then from the closet came the sound of something moving, a rattle that terminated in a rustle.

Paul Pry looked triumphantly at the sergeant.

"One of Gilvray's gang," whispered the sergeant to his men. "This baby tangled with him and they're for putting him on the spot. Get out on the side where he can't shoot at you through the door. Take a tear-gas bomb and hold it ready. All set?"

The men moved cautiously. Guns were trained on the closet. Some of the men took tear bombs and held them ready, and Paul Pry was one of these. He held a bomb in each hand, apparently badly shaken up, but ready to do battle.

The noise in the closet grew in volume.

"All ready?" asked the sergeant in a louder voice.

"All ready, sergeant," said one of the men.

"Hey, you in the closet!" bellowed the sergeant.

There was no answer. The rattlings and rustlings died away.

The sergeant motioned significantly to his men.

"Come on out," he bellowed. "This is the law. You're under arrest for breakin' in here, and we got you covered with riot guns."

There was no answer.

"Come out or we'll shoot through the door!" yelled the sergeant.

Still no answer. The men looked at one another, perplexed.

"He's in there all right," said the sergeant in a conversational voice.

One of the men flattened himself against the wall and stretched forth a long arm.

"Shoot when I open the door, unless he gets his hands up," he whispered.

The men tensed, the knob turned, and the door swung open.

A big rat glided out into the apartment, surveyed the threatening faces with shiny black eyes, twitched his whiskers in alarm and scuttled back into the shadows.

"Hell!" said the sergeant.

Somebody laughed. Paul Pry sank into a chair.

"Oh my Lord!" he said, and went limp.

"Release from the strain," explained the sergeant to his men. "Don't blame him for having the jumps. Gilvray's got him marked for a date with the undertaker. Give him a shot of that whiskey on the sideboard. Guess I'd better have one myself, come to think of it."

The sergeant reached for the whiskey as he talked, poured a drink for himself, then one for Paul Pry. After Paul Pry had drained the glass the sergeant had another for himself and set the bottle back on the sideboard.

The men looked at each other. One of them approached the bottle. Then the others gathered about the sideboard.

"Feel better?" asked the sergeant.

Paul Pry straightened up, nodded.

"My gosh, what a scare. I was certain it was someone in that closet waiting for me; and you know I've had trouble with some gangsters."

The sergeant nodded.

"I know," he said.

Paul Pry smiled wanly, produced a box of excellent cigars. The men helped themselves, cracked a few jokes, and trooped from the room.

Paul Pry listened to their steps shuffling in the corridor, and smiled. He reached in his hip pocket and produced a round metallic object.

The smile became a chuckle.

A big sign stretched vertically along the front of the imposing store. That sign spelled the magic word "F-O-R-M-A-N-'S."

At night the letters were lit one by one until the whole word flashed its message. Then a glittering diamond appeared both above and below the sign. Then all was dark for two seconds, at the end of which time the whole sign blinked on and off three times, then returned to its spelling of the word, a letter at a time.

Forman was proud of that sign. He was proud of all sorts of display which featured his name.

Back of the sign, the windows of the store were arranged after Forman's own idea. Always in the center of the display window was a field of black velvet. In the middle of this velvet reposed

some expensive article of jewelry with a price tag that was utterly prohibitive.

But in the foreground, between it and the casual observer, was always some attractive bargain, a large flawed diamond, some flashy article of jewelry which would appeal to the cheaper trade. Against this article of jewelry was a price card bearing a figure that was crossed out in red ink. Below had been written another figure which, in turn, was crossed out with black ink. Below that figure was a penciled figure which was always less than half the original price written at the top of the card.

Each price card had a printed slogan at the top.

BETTER AND CHEAPER
AT FORMAN'S

Whenever an article was considered a special bargain a cardboard silhouette of a red hand with a pointing finger and the words "LESS THAN HALF" stamped upon it in white ink was placed so it pointed at the article. These articles were always placed in the foreground of the window. Back of them came the black velvet, and back of this black velvet were grouped trays of gems.

Forman did a big business and prided himself upon his knowledge of both diamonds and human nature. He traded in both to equal advantage.

The hour was four o'clock in the afternoon.

Paul Pry emerged from a taxicab directly in front of Forman's, looked up and down the street. Under his arm he carried a locked box that was almost a portable safe. Paul Pry paid the taxi driver, walked swiftly into the store.

Three seconds later a man, walking with the rigid dignity of one who is endeavoring to conceal a bad case of alcoholic inebriety, stepped slowly to the show window, walked inside the store. Woozy Wiker, of Chicago, was strutting his stuff.

A clerk approached Paul Pry and was waved aside. Paul Pry's business was with none other than Forman himself. A clerk approached Woozy Wiker, and was fixed with a glassy eye that seemed to have difficulty in focusing.

"Gonna get married," enunciated Woozy Wiker, pronouncing each word as though it required a special effort. "Wanna get ring for shweetes' lil' girl inna world."

And his hand, fumbling in an inside pocket, produced a roll of bills which thudded upon the plate glass of the counter with a solid sound. The outer bill was so rolled as to disclose the figures in the corner, a one followed by three ciphers.

"Don' care what it costs," said Woozy Wiker.

While Woozy Wiker was propping himself against the edge of the showcase, Paul Pry was engaged in sizing up a man who walked toward him with shuffling gait and shrewd eyes.

Forman was past fifty. His head was thrust forward and down as though the spindling neck had grown tired of holding up the weight of the head. There was something about that long, bowed neck that reminded one of a drooping sunflower stem.

His nose was the dominant feature of his face, a long nose, high in the bridge, expanded in the nostrils. Back of the nose were eyes that studiously held no expression whatever. His skin was dark. The man looked to be of Russian extraction because of his high cheekbones. As a matter of fact, he was part Armenian, but he never disclosed his ancestry to anyone. Exactly where Forman came from was as much of a mystery as the exact source from which he purchased his diamonds. It was rumored that some of those diamonds had never paid duty.

He shuffled toward Paul Pry, and the expressionless eyes flicked once, and only once, to his face. They dropped almost immediately to the metal box which Paul Pry carried.

Pry leaned forward and lowered his tone.

"I want to arrange for the purchase of a very expensive piece of jewelry, something that will run around fifty thousand dollars. But I want a bargain. I understand you carry some bargains that could be sold—for cash."

Forman bowed.

"All my sales are for cash," he said, and his voice was as expressionless as his eyes.

Paul Pry nodded, the nod being a mere gesture of courteous affirmation, carrying no assurance of conviction with it.

"When I said for cash," he explained, "I meant for gold and currency. No checks."

Forman let his eyes drift to the heavy metal box once more. There was almost a trace of expression in those eyes.

"Ah yes," he purred, "cash."

"Cash," repeated Paul Pry.

"I have," said Forman, and his tone had commenced to take on just the edge of an expression, "something particularly choice in a diamond necklace—for sixty-one thousand dollars."

Paul Pry pointed to the box.

"I have with me precisely fifty thousand dollars—in cash."

"Ah yes," said Forman, "in cash."

He hesitated for just the right interval of time. When he spoke, his voice had assumed a certain timbre of expression which was definite.

"I might consider making a special price—for cash. Your name?"

"Pry," said that individual, and extended his hand.

Forman's hand was lukewarm, padded with a protective coating of flabby fat. It was the sort of hand that could be grasped and squeezed into any shape, like a chunk of moist putty.

"Pleased to meet you," said Forman. "Come upstairs to my office, and we'll talk business."

Paul Pry clasped the box under his arm, followed the jeweler up the stairs. Behind him, Woozy Wiker, from Chicago, was leering at the clerk.

"Don' want those small diamonds. Wanna large diamond."

The clerk nodded, sighed. "Wait here just a moment," he said, and stepped into the back room to consult with the stock man.

Paul Pry sat down in the office, looked about him appraisingly. Forman pressed a bell, gave a clerk instructions in a low voice, opened a box of cigars, passed over a perfecto and let his expressionless eyes drift to the strong box.

"Rather an unusual way of purchasing jewelry," he said.

Pry smiled.

"Not so bad. I have a strong box in which to bring the cash, and it makes a good wrapping for the jewels when I take them away."

There was a tapping at the door and the clerk brought in a handsome case. Forman took it, snapped back the lid and disclosed the cold fire of the sparkling diamonds.

Paul Pry allowed his face to register enthusiasm. Forman's eyes were on that face while his fingers toyed with the diamonds.

"Priced at sixty-one thousand dollars," said the jeweler.

"Fifty thousand is my limit."

"You like the piece?"

Paul Pry took it in his hands, studied it carefully.

"The design and workmanship isn't exactly what I had in mind, but when one is getting a price concession of eleven thousand dollars—" He let his voice trail off into significant silence.

"Yes," purred Forman, "when one is getting a price concession of eleven thousand dollars—" And he let his own voice trail off into silence.

Paul Pry took a bunch of keys from his pocket, fumbled them in his fingers. The expressionless eyes of Forman's swarthy countenance clamped upon the strong box in a rigid gaze of masked interest.

Paul Pry scowled. Then he tossed the keys to the polished mahogany of the table and explored his pocket with fingers which grew more and more frantic in their search.

He raised his eyes.

"Must have left it in my other waistcoat."

"The key?" asked Forman.

"The key," said Paul Pry.

Forman's face became utterly wooden in its masked expression.

"Ah, yes," he said.

"I know," said Paul Pry, getting to his feet. "You think this is all part of some elaborate skin game. I'll show you how wrong you are. I'll get that key and be back inside of twenty minutes. I've got an apartment not three blocks away. And you can sit right here and keep the box and the jewels right before you on this table. I'll open that box and show you whether or not I mean business."

There was no expression upon the dark face, yet it seemed that the studied lack of expression had melted into a more natural repose of feature.

"Very well," said Forman.

And Paul Pry, arising from the chair, rushed from the office with rapid strides. He took the stairs two at a time, and walked swiftly through the store.

It was obvious to anyone who had seen him enter that the strong box had been left behind. Woozy Wiker, from Chicago,

turned so that his head was lowered over the diamonds. His shoulders were hunched up.

"Gotta see th' li'l lady 'bout thish," he said, and scooped up the roll of bills he had thudded to the glass counter. "Ain't none of thoshe diamon's big 'nough for li'l lady. Nishest girl inna worl'."

And he straightened back from the counter, walked to the door with rigid dignity, leaving behind him a flushed and very exasperated clerk.

Once at the door of the store and his manner underwent a sudden change, this Woozy Wiker from Chicago. He became as swiftly efficient as Paul Pry had been. He walked with nervous rapidity upon catlike feet to the alley where a gray Cadillac was parked. In this Cadillac sat three men.

"Ready," he said.

The car purred into action, swept around the corner of the alley, parked at Forman's store.

Two men got out on the run, entered the swinging door.

"Where's Forman?" called one of the men to the clerk who was reassorting the scattered diamonds left by Woozy Wiker in a state of utter confusion.

The clerk jerked his hand toward the back.

"Office," he said, and went back to his task.

The men had been headed toward the office, and their steps were fast. They had flung the inquiry in a terse sentence at the clerk and had not hesitated for an answer. These things would have been apparent to the clerk, had he but taken the time to consider it. But he was nervous and irritated. A fat commission which had seemed to be fairly within his grasp had lurched from the door in a state of alcoholic indecision, and the clerk's feelings were exceedingly bitter.

The two took the stairs to the office with springy steps. Their hands were flashing under coats as they gained the top step. By the time they turned and flung open the heavy door, those hands glittered with blue steel.

Forman sat at the table. Pushed to one side was a diamond necklace, ignored. His expressionless eyes were fastened upon a metal box. In such a manner might a snake stare at a mouse which was soon to become a meal. He did not look up as the door opened.

"Back already?" he asked.

"Put 'em up!" said one of the men.

Forman looked up then, and his eyes assumed expression for the first time. The dark face twitched. Then panic gripped him. He reached for the metal box.

"No, no!" he shouted.

"Let him have it, Bill," said one of the men.

One of the blue steel weapons flashed in a swift arc. That arc terminated upon the skull of the swarthy jeweler. There was the peculiar "konk" made by steel upon arched bone, and the grasping hands became limp. The inert figure of Forman settled in the chair, slumped over so the bleeding head rested upon the mahogany table.

The man who had clubbed the gun barrel grabbed the box.

"Lookit the sparklers!" said one of the bandits.

And, as he spoke, he scooped them into his pocket.

They searched the jeweler with swiftly efficient fingers. They made a quick search of the table drawers, and that search netted them three more show pieces of gems and some eight hundred dollars in cash.

Then they started down the stairs.

They were halfway to the door when one of the clerks, noticing the grim efficiency of their swift strides, raised his voice. The men didn't stop.

"Stop thief!" yelled the clerk, but they were then almost at the door.

One of the men whirled, a blue steel weapon flashed fire. At the roar of the explosion, glass shattered in the showcase behind the clerk. The clerk flung himself down behind the counter. Other clerks did likewise. A woman who had been examining opals screamed and slid to the floor in a faint. Somewhere a bell clanged an imperative alarm. On the sidewalk, passing pedestrians, sensing that something was wrong, stared in wonder. The two men forced their way through the swinging doors, sprinted across the curb and into the gray Cadillac.

Someone shouted. The Cadillac purred away into traffic. Men ran from the store, waved their arms, yelled wildly. The traffic officer at the corner heard the shouts, raised his hand.

The gray Cadillac paid no attention to his signal. It flashed by with constantly increasing speed. The officer tugged at his weapon, drew it, then recognized the futility of firing in that crowded shopping district thronged with early home-goers. He turned and rushed toward the jewelry store.

At the second corner the Cadillac turned on screaming tires and tore into the boulevard. Behind it, a low roadster purred smoothly. That roadster had swung out behind the gray car somewhere after the first intersection had been passed.

The men in the Cadillac paid no attention to it. Bullet-proof windows tightly closed, gray painted steel enclosing them, they had nothing to fear. If the officers pursued, they had machine guns with which they could mow down the minions of the law.

Woozy Wiker, sitting in the front seat, wrestled with the lock of the strong box with a jimmy. The car was flashing past intersections with swift speed.

One of the men looked behind, said something to the driver. The gray car slowed to a sedate speed and turned into a side street. Two pairs of cruel eyes surveyed the low roadster which purred behind.

The roadster slowed, rounded the corner, slid to the curb. Two hands reached for the weapons which were kept in the gray Cadillac.

But the man who slid from the roadster seemed interested in some house number. The men in the Cadillac hesitated. Woozy Wiker, from Chicago, gave a final wrench to the lock of the strong box. The Cadillac gathered speed.

The man who had slipped from behind the steering wheel of the roadster made a swift leap toward the machine he had vacated. The Cadillac swung for the corner.

The lid of the strong box came up. There was a faint hissing noise. Someone choked. The driver gasped some comment, strangled mid-sentence, and reached a hand for a window. The two bandits in the rear seat flung toward the windows.

The hissing noise grew in volume.

The car swayed, lurched, wobbled, crashed into a telephone pole, rolled to its side. A fender ripped off. There was the scream of steel upon cement, and then the car swung on its side. The wheels that were free of the pavement continued to revolve.

Men ran from houses and stores. Women screamed. But the first to reach the wreck was Paul Pry.

Four men were in the closed car, four men who were unconscious. On the front seat was a black bag. A metal strong box had been forced open and the impact of the collision with the telephone pole had flung it forward. A police tear-gas bomb was still hissing its deadly stream of poisoned gas into the confines of the car.

Paul Pry held his breath, made a swift grab for the black bag, thrust it under his coat, jumped back.

"The car's full of gas, keep away!" he yelled at those who came up on the run. "I'll get an ambulance."

He whirled and dashed away. No one thought to look at him. Their eyes were fastened on the sprawled bodies within the armored car. One, more brave than the rest, held his breath, rushed forward and dragged out one of the forms.

The hissing noise ceased. People standing near the car choked and wiped away tears which streamed from their eyes. A strong wind swept away the gas.

Paul Pry climbed into his roadster and drove away.

By the time the police were notified of the strange accident, the men who had been in the car had recovered consciousness and melted into the crowd. The police were very, very busy about that time throwing a cordon about the shopping district so that a gray Cadillac should not escape. When they learned of the accident they came, looked, and came in still larger numbers. The gray Cadillac lay on its side. Beneath its seats was an assortment of lethal weapons, ranging from revolvers to a sub-machine gun.

But the occupants of the car had escaped, and there was no trace of the gems which were missing from Forman's jewelry store. To be sure, there was a metal box in the car, the lock showing that it had been forced. But there was nothing in that box. A tear-gas bomb, bearing the stamp of the police department, was found in the car. Its presence was not explained.

Forman had recovered consciousness by the time Paul Pry returned to the store, bearing the key to the lock box. The place was filled with excited clerks, and a cordon of police kept out those who had no business.

Forman looked at Paul Pry.

"See my lawyer," he said, and groaned.

"I have the key to the box. What's happened?" asked Paul Pry.

"See my lawyer," said Forman and sopped the wet handkerchief he held in his hand to his forehead.

"But my box!" protested Paul Pry.

"See my lawyer," said Forman.

Out in a big house in an exclusive residential district Benjamin Franklin Gilvray, known to the underworld as Big Front Gilvray, stared at a man whose face was bruised, whose clothes were torn.

"And that's all there was in the box?"

"Every damn thing—the tear-gas bomb and the paper in the envelope."

Big Front Gilvray's eyes were glittering with rage. His mouth was twitching, and the flabby facial muscles distorted his features as they writhed in an ecstasy of rage. He read again the note in his hand.

> Doubtless you are wondering why I don't pick on someone else. It's your name, and the crudity of your methods that makes me want to pick on you. When you were christened Benjamin Franklin it was because your proud parents thought you would grow to be like that kindly philosopher. It needs no comment to emphasize your betrayal of their affection and confidence.
>
> And then again, you're such a nice fat goose to lay golden eggs for me. The rewards I've picked up from busting up your crooked schemes are running into a tidy figure. You're an ideal victim because you're so slick the police can get nothing on you. That leaves me without competition in plucking the golden eggs from your nest.
>
> And thanks a lot for Woozy Wiker, the gentleman who was imported from Chicago to put me on the spot. I find his childlike innocence so refreshing after dealing with hard-boiled crooks. I could really never have engineered this little coup, if it hadn't been for the esteemed imported killer, Woozy Wiker, from Chicago.
>
> "The Daisy Pusher."

Big Front Gilvray dashed the note to the floor, stamped on it with his heel, and began to curse. The gangster who sat opposite him cowered under the blast of that blistering profanity.

* * *

Inspector Quigley sat in Paul Pry's apartment, and his expression was anything but placid.

"Look here, Pry, you admit you planted that box so there'd be a robbery. You pinched the tear-gas bomb from the police department. Now you've assigned your claim against Forman to some girl, and you're dickering with me to turn in the jewelry for a reward. This is the fourth time you've recovered stolen property and claimed a reward on it. It begins to smell fishy."

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders and reached for a cigarette.

"Suit yourself, inspector. You know that Woozy Wiker was imported from Chicago to kill me. I knew he would do it unless I beat him to the punch. You know as well as I do the police are powerless to prevent these gang killings.

"I planted the box, figuring that he'd steal it and it alone. The tear-gas bomb just *happened* to be left in my pocket after the police had armed me to capture a gangster. That turned out to be a false alarm, a couple of rats in my closet, you know.

"How was I to know that the bandits would make their escape before the police arrived on the scene? How was I to know that Forman would leave out a few choice bits of jewelry for the bandits to take?

"I thought the bandits would grab the box, try to make their escape in their Cadillac, spring the tear-gas bomb which I'd fixed to go off when the box was open, wreck the car, and fall into the hands of the police. You see, that Cadillac had to be operated with the windows tightly closed to guard against bullets. It was the one weak point in the scheme of its operation. The seeds of its own destruction, one might say.

"I admit that I was the first on the scene of the accident, that I grabbed a black bag, not knowing at the time what was in it. Then I ran to look for the police. Before I could find an officer and get back, the men had gone."

Inspector Quigley bit the end from a cigar, scraped a vicious match across the sole of his shoe.

"We were sending the officers out to put a cordon around the district," he said.

Paul Pry nodded.

"Of course, but I couldn't know that. And— Well, inspector, it wouldn't look very well in print. You threw out your officers,

left the shopping district unprotected, and allowed the criminals to escape.

"How much better it would be for you to announce that you had recovered the stolen jewelry, captured the armored Cadillac, and expected to make some important arrests within the next twenty-four hours. Then you could collect the reward which Forman has offered for the recovery of the jewelry."

Inspector Quigley flung the burning match into the gas fireplace and grunted.

"And split the reward with you, eh?"

"Of course," said Paul Pry. "You take the credit and half of the reward. I get half of the reward and take all of the risk. You know, inspector, I've made you a pretty penny in reward money the last few months, and it's all been legitimate."

Inspector Quigley regarded the smoking end of the cigar with judicious deliberation.

"How about this claim your lawyer has presented against Forman for the loss of fifty thousand dollars cash that was entrusted to his possession. You must admit there wasn't fifty thousand dollars cash in that box."

Paul Pry looked his innocence.

"Why, how can you say that? No one knows just exactly what was in that box except the bandits who stole it, and they won't testify, of course."

"Of course," echoed the inspector.

"And then again," resumed Paul Pry, "that claim has been assigned to Miss Virginia Smithers, a very estimable young lady who claims Forman swindled her out of seventeen hundred dollars' worth of diamonds through a substitution. I understand my attorney is compromising the claim with Forman for exactly seventeen hundred dollars—the claim for the loss of the fifty thousand dollars in cash."

"Humph!" said Inspector Quigley.

It was significant that he had come alone, that there were no outside witnesses to his interview with Paul Pry.

"Humph!" he said again.

"The reward offered for the return of the jewels is seven thousand five hundred dollars," reminded Paul Pry. "You can figure fifty percent of that as well as I can. It takes no great problem in mental arithmetic."

Quigley nodded, again regarded the smoldering tip of his cigar.

"What I'm trying to convince myself of is that you ain't sort of an accomplice," he said. "I couldn't compound a felony."

"Of course not," agreed Paul Pry with a smile. "If you think I have committed a felony, you have only to ask the district attorney if he'd like to prosecute me before a jury. His case would disclose that I was at war with a gang, that I was fighting for my life against methods which admittedly leave the police powerless. My life was threatened by a notorious gangster killed from Chicago. I set a trap to defend myself. Unwittingly, that trap included the recovery of stolen gems. I offer to surrender those gems to the police and split the reward.

"If such a case were prosecuted against me, you'd have a hard time proving the facts. You'd make the police the laughing-stock of the country. The district attorney would be laughed out of court, and you'd lose the reward.

"And if you even spoke to the district attorney about it and got his advice, he'd want you to split your half of the reward with him. One fourth of seven thousand five hundred dollars is much less than one half of that sum."

Inspector Quigley sighed.

"Get me the sparklers," he said. "I'll turn 'em in for the reward."

Paul Pry smiled.

"About this Woozy Wiker, from Chicago," he began, "don't you think—"

Inspector Quigley interrupted.

"You can forget him. Gangs have rather an effective way of handling gangsters who have done some pretty crude bungling, particularly when those gangsters are away from their home town and all their friends. Woozy Wiker's body was found at daylight this morning. He got the works."

"Got the works?" asked Paul Pry.

"Yes. They took him for a ride. There were ten bullet holes in him. And it's a damned good riddance. He was a notorious killer. He'd taken half a dozen of 'em for a ride. Now he goes for a ride himself. He gets the works."

"I see," said Paul Pry, "Wiker gets the works. I believe there's

something in the Bible about he who lives by the sword dying by the sword, isn't there?"

"How should I know?" asked the inspector. "Get me those sparklers so I can turn 'em in. I'm buying a new car today, and the money'll come in handy."

A Double Deal in Diamonds

The corpse had been dumped from an automobile, a cryptic message pinned to its coat—"This smart aleck won't do any more meddling." But somebody had made a mistake in identity. The "smart aleck" was not only very much alive but ready to prove it, as "Big Front" Gilvray was soon to find out.

Paul Pry jabbed at a dummy with the flashing blade of a sword. There was, in the lithe, swift strength of the man, the suggestion of a steel spring. His wrists flicked, the blade flashed, the dummy spun half around as eighteen inches of cold steel ripped through its back.

The door of the room reverberated to a knock.

Paul Pry whipped out the blade, sheathed it and stood listening, his head slightly cocked to one side.

The room boomed once more to the knocking, and the knocking took up a certain rhythmic cadence. A long, a short, two longs, a short—silence.

Paul Pry moved to the side of the door and placed his eye to something that looked like the end of a field-glass, and which was, in fact, the eyepiece of a periscope.

He saw two men standing before the door. One of them was "Mugs" Magoo, the one-armed man who acted as special agent for Paul Pry. The other wore a uniform with gold lace, brass buttons and cap.

Paul waited until the uniformed figure turned so that the features were visible through the periscope. When he had recognized Sergeant Mahoney of headquarters, he swung back a heavy iron bar, lifted a clamp, shot a spring lock and opened the door.

"Gentlemen, come in," he said.

Sergeant Mahoney pushed forward.

"You're barricaded with enough bolts and bars," he growled.

Paul Pry smiled affably.

"Yes," he said.

Sergeant Mahoney tapped the door.

"Steel," he remarked.

"Bullet proof," said Paul Pry.

"Gimme a drink. You guys can put on the talk-fest," grunted Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry closed the steel door. He shot the iron bar into place, then turned the clamp that shot bars into deep recesses in the floor. The spring lock clicked. Motioning the men to chairs, he took out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

Sergeant Mahoney surveyed the swinging dummy with interest.

"Practicin' up on his fencin'," explained Mugs Magoo, as he filled the glasses.

Mugs and the sergeant had a drink. Paul Pry smiled courteously at them.

"You've got to leave town," said Sergeant Mahoney, setting down his empty glass. "I'm arranging for a police escort at noon. We'll put you in a drawing room on the 12:30 train, and we'll have plainclothesmen—"

"Whoa, back up!" smiled Paul Pry. "What's it all about?"

"'Big Front' Gilvray has ordered your death."

"Well, that's no news, and why not escort Big Front Gilvray out of town?"

"Because he wouldn't go, and we haven't got anything definite on him. If we did have, we'd have a battle and a lot of men would get bumped off. B.F. Gilvray is one gangster who has both brains and guts."

Paul Pry made a gesture with his right hand, a sweeping gesture that indicated his private opinion of B.F. Gilvray, arch-gangster.

"He's been gunning for me two months now. I'm still here."

"That's not the point. He was mildly irritated before. He's in earnest now. The gang's been ordered to get you and get you right. And Gilvray's one of the toughest men in the game."

Paul Pry yawned and lit a cigarette.

"He may seem that way to you," he said. "To me he's just the goose that lays the golden eggs."

Sergeant Mahoney sighed and leaned forward in his chair.

"All right. I've got to give it to you. Here it comes. You'll leave town at noon today, and you'll stay out. You started picking on Gilvray for some reason or other that no one knows about. You trailed his gang around. Everytime they pulled a crime you managed to cop the take and turn it in for a reward.

"Naturally, Gilvray got sore. He's going to kill you, and that's making the situation one we don't like. You two are really staging a war, and we're not going to stand for gang wars.

"Of course, we're going to try and get something on Gilvray and send him to the pen. But he's slick. We haven't been able to get anything pinned on him yet. And he's a hard-boiled egg."

Paul Pry yawned again.

"I'm picking on him because I don't like him. His name is Benjamin Franklin Gilvray. They call him Big Front because he's such a four-flusher. And if you think I'm going to let the police run me out of town because a crook doesn't like me, you've got another guess coming."

Sergeant Mahoney fished a heavy hand in the inside pocket of his uniform coat.

"These," he remarked, "will make you change your mind."

And he flipped four glossy-surfaced photographs out on the table. Paul Pry picked up those pictures, one at a time. They were photographs of a dead man, taken from different angles. They showed the corpse as it had been found, and the pictures were gruesome in the extreme.

The body had evidently been thrown from an automobile. It had been dumped out on the roadside with the callous cruelty of gangsters to whom a corpse is merely carrion. It was lying on one side, an arm twisted back, the legs sticking stiffly out behind with the shod feet pointed at different angles.

Over the chest of the body was a matted mass of stain which

appeared on the photograph to be tar. In the center of the stain were three black perforations. Pinned to the coat was an oblong strip of paper, upon which had been printed a message.

The third photograph showed the features of the cold face. They were startlingly like the features of Paul Pry. The fourth photograph showed the oblong of paper and the printing which was on it. Paul Pry held the picture to the light so that he could read the scrawled message.

THIS SMART ALECK WON'T DO ANY MORE MEDDLING.

The message was, naturally, unsigned. Paul flipped back the photographs.

"You mean they thought this chap was the one who had been meddling?" he asked.

"I mean," said Sergeant Mahoney, "that they thought this chap was you. He was seen near here, and their choppers picked him up and took him for a ride. He turns out to be a banker from Detroit, in the city on a business visit, and there's going to be hell to pay.

"We can't prove anything. Big Front Gilvray's got an air-tight alibi—but we know what we know. So I picked up Mugs Magoo and told him I had to see you. And I'm telling you you've got to leave town until we can get the thing worked out somehow."

Paul Pry crossed to the sideboard, filled the two glasses and handed them to his guests.

"Do you know, sergeant," he said slowly, "I have a funny hunch about Big Front Gilvray."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I think the goosie is getting ready to lay another golden egg."

Sergeant Mahoney strangled on his drink, then wiped his eyes, his face red from the fit of coughing.

"You mean to say you still refuse to leave?"

"Absolutely, and if the police try to make me, I'll tell the whole story to the newspapers. Do I make myself plain, sergeant?"

Sergeant Mahoney jerked his cap down on his forehead and strode toward the door.

"Perfectly," he snapped, "and the police protection you can count on is exactly zero. You've cleaned up over twenty thousand dollars in reward money just from riding Big Front Gilvray around. You've made him the laughing stock of the underworld —and you'll be pushing daisies this time next month!"

Paul Pry stifled a yawn.

"Let the sergeant out, Mugs," he said.

Mugs Magoo stared at Paul Pry with glassy eyes that seemed to be pushing from their sockets.

"Are you crazy?" he asked.

Paul Pry shook his head.

"Certainly not. As Sergeant Mahoney remarked, I've cleaned up over twenty thousand dollars in golden eggs Big Front Gilvray has so kindly laid for me. Why should I be crazy to figure on another golden egg?"

Mugs Magoo reached for the whiskey bottle and filled his glass.

"You show your face outside of this hangout and you'll be stretched on a marble slab."

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders.

"But you certainly wouldn't want me to let Gilvray go unpunished for his murder. Come, Mugs, do as I tell you. Go out and find Gilvray's scouts. I want to know who they are."

Mugs Magoo had derived his nickname because of a camera-eye and a memory that was utterly infallible. He never forgot a face, a name or a connection. At one time he had been a trusted officer. A political shake-up had thrown him off the force. An accident had taken off his right arm at the shoulder. Booze had done the rest.

He had been utterly down and out when Paul Pry had rescued him from the gutter and turned the man's remarkable knowledge of the underworld to advantage.

"Gilvray's desperate," mumbled Mugs Magoo.

"For heaven's sake! Do I have to listen to all that again? You're as bad as Mahoney. What I want to know is how Gilvray gets the information for his hauls."

"Scouts, of course. Same way all the rest of 'em do. They have people circulating around the jewelry stores, the night clubs, the wealthy residential districts. They spot out the lay —"

"All right, Mugs, what I ask you is simple enough for a man of your contacts. Spot the scouts Gilvray is using."

Mugs sighed, and poured himself another glass of whiskey.

"I'm goin' to have a hard time gettin' my whiskey after you're gone," he said.

"Gone?" asked Paul Pry.

"Yeah. Pushin' daisies," said Mugs Magoo, and lugubriously started upon his mission.

When he had gone, Paul Pry put on his hat and a topcoat, slipped to the kitchen of his apartment and listened.

That apartment was his hideout, a veritable fortress. The windows were steel-shuttered and iron-barred. The doors were bullet proof—and there was a secret exit which even Mugs Magoo didn't know about.

Paul Pry pushed up a trap door in the top of the kitchen closet, crawled between walls for some twenty feet, opened another trap door, found himself in a vacant apartment, slipped through that apartment to a side door, emerged in a corridor, and finally reached the sidewalk half a block from the entrance to the narrow building where his own apartment was located.

Paul Pry paused in the doorway to survey the street.

He noticed a plainclothesman on duty, lounging directly opposite the doorway to his own apartment. He also noticed a touring car in which two men sat. Those men were well tailored, but there was an alert watchfulness about them which made them seem far from being gentlemen of leisure.

Paul Pry waited in the doorway until a cruising cab driver caught his signal and pulled to the curb. Head bent forward, so that his hat covered his features, he skipped into the cab and gave the address of an interurban depot.

From that point on his moves were made openly and apparently as part of a well-laid plan.

He took an interurban car for Centerville, a rather distant and somewhat isolated suburb. There he went to the main hotel and registered as Harley Garfield of Chicago. He paid a week's rent on his room, tipped a bell boy for getting him settled, stated he would have some baggage sent up later, and then sought out the most pretentious jewelry store in the town.

The proprietor himself came forward.

He was snowy-haired, walked with a limp, and his eyes were filmed with age. Yet there was dignity in the man's carriage. About him was that subtle something that characterizes an aristocrat.

"I want," said Paul Pry, "to get some diamonds. I want a rather expensive necklace. I am willing to go as high as fifty thousand dollars."

The filmed eyes showed a trace of expression which was instantly suppressed.

"Your name?" asked the jeweler.

"Garfield. Harley Garfield, of Chicago."

And Paul Pry extended his hand.

"Moffit," said the jeweler, shaking hands. "I am pleased to meet you. Living here at present, Mr. Garfield?"

"At the hotel. Room 908."

"And you wanted a very fine string of diamonds."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry I haven't anything in stock, but you will understand how utterly impossible it is for a store of this size to keep a stock that would compare with the city stores.

"I'll give you a card to my wholesaler and you can go to the city and have the best selection available. Or you can go in with me, if you'd prefer, and I'll introduce you personally and assist in the selection."

Paul Pry smiled and shook his head.

"Neither. I hate the city. Cities depress me. I had a nervous breakdown and my physicians advised me to avoid noise. That's why I'm here where it's quiet."

There was just the finest trace of frosty suspicion upon the features of the jeweler.

"I'm sorry I have nothing in stock," he said.

Paul Pry took a wallet from his coat pocket and flipped it open.

From its interior he took bills of thousand dollar denomination. One by one, he counted them out upon the counter. The jeweler gazed at them with eyes that grew wider as each bill was deposited upon the counter.

"I am a business man," said Paul Pry. "I want to purchase a diamond necklace through you. I want the benefit of your judgment. And I am in a hurry. I, also, am hard to please. I am

giving you twenty thousand dollars in cash as an evidence of good faith.

"Please give me a receipt. In that receipt you will mention that if I am satisfied with such necklaces as you can show me I will pay for one in cash. If I do not select one which pleases me, you will return my money less the sum of five hundred dollars which will compensate you for your trouble and expense. Now when can you have the first batch of necklaces here for my inspection?"

Moffit picked up the stacked money with trembling fingers. He counted it, examined each bill, then wrote out a receipt. Then he consulted the time-table of the interurban.

"Our train service is very poor," he said. "I can have some necklaces for your inspection at 3:38. The car leaves the city at 2:10, and I will have the stones sent on that car."

Paul Pry nodded.

"Very well. I will be here at 3:45. That will give you a chance to have the necklaces properly displayed."

Moffit tugged at the fingers of his left hand with his right hand until the knuckle joints popped, one by one.

"I'd like to have you here as soon as possible. If you don't want the necklaces I'd want to send them back on the 4:15. I haven't facilities for keeping such valuable gems here."

Paul Pry nodded casually.

"I'll make a selection by four o'clock," he promised. "Good morning, Mr. Moffit."

The jeweler looked at his watch.

"It's afternoon now," he said. "I'll telephone my wholesaler before I go to lunch."

Paul Pry smiled.

"My mistake. Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Garfield."

Paul Pry sauntered down a side street from which he could watch the door of Moffit's jewelry store. In precisely five minutes he saw Mr. Moffit emerge and hobble excitedly toward the bank. From time to time, the snowy-haired gentleman glanced apprehensively over his shoulder.

Paul Pry smiled and returned to his room in the hotel where he made some casual inquiries about train service, placed a telephone call to the baggage department of the depot, and then summoned the porter.

"My baggage is lost," he informed that individual. "What's the best way to get action?"

"There ain't any," said the porter. "You cuss out the local man. He ain't got the baggage. He puts in a tracer. You can't cuss the man that lost the baggage and there ain't no satisfaction in cussing anybody else. If they find it, they'll send it to you. If they don't you'll have an argument with the claim department. I can't help you."

Paul Pry gathered himself in erect dignity.

"I," he announced, "shall go directly to headquarters. How can I get to the city?"

"Interurban."

"No other way?"

"Automobile."

"There isn't a train for two hours, and automobile will be almost as slow as a train by the time I've fought my way through all the traffic."

The porter shrugged.

"Airport down here. A guy's barnstorming at five bucks a throw."

Paul Pry snapped his jaw shut.

"Here," he said, "is where you see some action on a baggage claim. I'm going to talk turkey to the higher-ups in that railroad company, and I don't mean maybe."

He pulled his hat on with a vigorous gesture of defiance to the world in general, left the hotel, found the barnstorming aviator and arranged for passage to the city.

The plane roared from the field, clipped against the blue of the skyline like some great bird and droned into the horizon. Paul Pry consulted his watch, made careful note of the time, sat back in his seat and smiled.

The vacant stretches of rocky woodland flashed past, relieved by occasional buildings clustered in little grounds. A great body of water showed dark and sluggish. In the distance the congested district of the city showed as a white haze of buildings.

Momentarily those buildings became more clear. The ground below presented scattering dwellings which gave place to small communities, and finally merged into a compact mass of structures. The streets became congested, walked by higher buildings, and finally became deep canyons. Towering skyscrapers seemed

to stretch clutching fingers at the undercarriage. The roar of the motor suddenly throttled down to a mere clicking. The plane stood on one wing, drifted down in a steep slant. A field opened up below. The plane straightened into a flat glide, and little jars ran up from the landing wheels.

Paul Pry took off helmet and goggles, shook hands with the pilot, handed him a bill, and strode purposefully toward that end of the field where taxicabs were clustered.

"Stillwell Hotel," he snapped at the driver as he entered the cab.

The cab speeded down the cross streets, stopped and eased its way into the traffic of the boulevard. At the Stillwell Hotel, Paul Pry walked across the lobby, engaged another cab, and was taken to the interurban depot.

He had twenty-five minutes to spare.

He employed that twenty-five minutes in studying the faces of such passengers as presented themselves at the gate marked Centerville.

The women he dismissed with a single glance. A florid gentleman with a suitcase and an anemic man with a brief case were also passed up. It was when a young man appeared, striding purposefully, a black handbag under his arm, that Paul Pry's eyes became diamond hard.

That man glanced at a wrist watch, clamped the bag under his arm in a solid grip and turned his eyes to the sporting section of the newspaper which he carried.

For ten minutes he was engrossed in the paper, then the gate slid back upon well-oiled rollers, and the little group filed toward the interurban car.

The young man glanced about him, took mental note of the occupants of the car, set the black handbag on the seat beside him, and turned his attention toward the newspaper again. The black bag was distinctly studded with brass rivets.

Apparently, the transportation of small fortunes in gems was merely a matter of daily routine with the young man. He watched the bag as a mere routine, not nervously or apprehensively.

The car jolted out of the depot, clanged its way into the subway tunnel, rushed through the darkness, and finally began a long sloping climb. Out into the daylight and the city streets it

emerged. On either side were thronged sidewalks and tall buildings.

The man with the bag lurched and swayed with the motion of the car, his eyes still devouring the sporting page of the afternoon newspaper. The black bag reposed on the seat beside him.

Yet the man was watchful, as was shown when the car came to a stop at its first station. The sporting page came down and the man's eyes came up, searched the faces of the passengers, turned to the black bag.

Two people got off. The bell clanged. The car lurched forward, gathered speed, and the sporting page came up again.

Paul Pry lounged back in his seat. He was sitting where he could command a view of the young man, and to say that any single motion missed the diamond-hard glitter of his appraising eyes would be to distort the facts.

At 3:37 the car jolted to a stop at Centerville. Paul Pry glanced from the window. He saw that a paunchy individual in olive drab with a gold star on his vest and a big cigar in his mouth was scrutinizing the faces of the passengers as they descended from the car.

The man with the black bag, now quietly watchful, eased his way to the vestibule of the car, walked down the steel steps with a catlike tread, glanced at the paunchy individual and bowed.

The officer came forward, extended a fat hand, talked for a few minutes in a mysterious undertone, and then escorted the messenger to the jewelry store of Samuel Moffit.

Paul Pry waited for five minutes, then strolled casually toward the store. But he did not enter. Instead he waited to see if the messenger was coming out. When he found that the messenger remained inside the store, Paul Pry walked briskly to his hotel, went to his room, and telephoned Moffit.

"Garfield speaking, Mr. Moffit. Did the gems come?"

"Yes. I have them here."

"Sorry I can't get down right away. I have a long-distance call coming in. I'll make it as soon as I can."

Moffit's voice sounded a little nervous.

"I'd like to get the messenger back on the 4:15, you know," said Moffit.

Pry hesitated.

"Tell you what you do," he said at length, "bring the stones on up to my room, 908. I'll look them over here. That will be better than coming down to the store, anyhow."

"Very well," said Moffit, but his tone was suddenly cold.

Five minutes later there were steps in the corridor, followed by a knock at the door.

Paul Pry flung it open.

"Mr. Garfield," said Samuel Moffit, "shake hands with Phil Kelley, our chief of police."

Paul Pry extended his hand.

"Chief, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Kelley's hand was flabby, but his eyes were hard, and he clamped the cigar in one corner of his mouth with an aggressive snap of his bulldog jaw.

"Howdy," he growled.

"I've got a fortune in diamonds here," said Moffit, "and I wanted an escort. I'd be responsible if anything happened to them after they got to Centerville. Before that time it's up to the wholesaler."

"I see," said Pry in a tone of voice which indicated that the information was of no interest to him. "Let's look at the stones."

They spread them out on the table.

Chief Kelley twisted the cigar in his massive jaw and kept his eyes glued to Paul Pry's hands.

Paul Pry examined the stones and convinced Mr. Moffit in short order that here was one man who knew diamonds when he saw them.

"These stones aren't well matched," said Paul Pry, pushing aside one necklace. "The settings are obsolete on this one. There are flaws in these stones. Hello, here's something! I didn't want a bracelet, wonder why they put that in. It's a nice bit of workmanship, however."

Moffit cleared his throat.

"They always do that when they're sending something special down. They include something else they think a customer might be interested in."

Paul Pry examined the bracelet with greater care.

"A mighty fine piece of work. What's the price on it?"

"I can let you have that at four thousand. It's much lower than I'd have to ask you for it if I was carrying it in stock."

Paul Pry pursed his lips.

"Mr. Moffit," he said, "I'm going to speak frankly to you. This bracelet is a very artistic piece of work, and is well priced. But your wholesaler hasn't played fair on the necklaces. He's unloaded a bunch of junk on you. As an experienced jeweler, you must recognize that fact."

Moffit reddened.

"To tell the truth, I owe them a lot of money. I guess—well, I guess they figured any buyer for a very expensive necklace out here in the country would be—well, he wouldn't know diamonds so well."

He blurted his explanation like a schoolboy caught cheating during examinations.

Paul Pry instantly set him at ease.

"That's all right, Moffit. It isn't your fault. I'm going to send these all back. But I'm going to take that bracelet. That's one bargain they slipped in, thinking they'd have to give the customer a good bargain on something he hadn't ordered."

Moffit talked frankly and rapidly now.

"They do that all the time. That's the handicap the country merchant has to fight. They knew you wanted a necklace, so they sent a bunch of poor ones at fancy prices. But they wanted to tempt you to buy a bracelet into the bargain, so they sent a mighty nice value in one."

Paul Pry's eyes gleamed in a frosty smile.

"Well, Moffit. I'll take the bracelet and we'll send the others back. But I won't call the deal off on the necklace. You can telephone your wholesaler that you're dealing with a man who knows something about diamonds.

"Tell him that the customer simply threw up his hands when he saw the bunch of junk they'd sent down. Your profit on the bracelet will compensate you for your time. You've got twenty thousand of my money. Take out four for the bracelet, and leave the rest in your safe.

"Then within a day or two, I'll give you a chance to let the wholesaler send down a bunch of new necklaces. He'll be sore at losing a sale, and will conclude he's got to play square. He should send some good buys with the next bunch."

Moffit's face lit into a smile.

"Garfield," he said, "that's mighty white of you! I haven't got

your money in my safe. I'm keeping it in the bank. If you want, I'll refund the sixteen thousand right now."

Paul Pry shook his head.

"Not at all," he said, and thrust the bracelet in his pocket. "You can get these necklaces back to the store in time to let the messenger catch the 4:15. But you'll have to hurry."

Moffit scooped the necklaces back into the black bag. It was the same black bag that the messenger had carried on the interurban.

"Check these things with me, will you, chief?" asked the jeweler. "I want to make sure the wholesaler can't slip anything over me— You'll pardon me, Garfield. It's not intended as casting any suspicion on you, but I've got some valuable stones here, and I want to see that they check out all right."

Pry laughed.

"Certainly," he said. "I understand."

They checked the necklaces against an inventory which Moffit took from his pocket, shook hands hastily, and left the hotel.

Behind them, Paul Pry was left, the legitimate possessor of one bracelet for which he had paid four thousand dollars and which he might sell for approximately three thousand five hundred if a man watched his opportunity. It was, as bracelets went, a very fair buy.

Paul Pry took occasion to tell the porter that he had certainly stirred up some action in railroad circles and that the baggage would most decidedly be forthcoming within the next forty-eight hours.

Then he strolled casually about the streets and took the 5:15 train for the city,

Mugs Magoo called up on the unlisted telephone. "Been trying to get you all afternoon," he complained.

"Yes?"

"Yes. Why didn't you answer?"

"Wasn't here."

"There's a special duty dick down in front who swears you haven't left the building."

Paul Pry chuckled.

"Come on over and tell me the news, Mugs."

"I'm down on the corner at the drug store. Be right up."

And he was pounding on the door within three minutes of the time he hung up the telephone. But Paul Pry went through the same elaborate precautions before opening the door.

Big Front Gilvray was a tough baby, and there was no use underestimating the murderous resources of the gangster.

Mugs Magoo poured a stiff drink of whiskey and sighed.

"I'm goin' to miss this hooch when you're gone, chief."

Paul Pry laughed.

"Spoken like a real man, Mugs; no maudlin sentiment, just plain, practical, selfish sincerity."

Mugs flushed.

"I didn't mean it that way. But I am goin' to miss the hooch. I'll miss you too, but I can get along without you. I can't get along without the hooch."

Paul Pry chuckled.

"Under those circumstances, Mugs, I'd better not go."

"Not a chance," proclaimed Mugs, gloomily. "I've seen 'em come and I've seen 'em go. Sometimes a man marked for gang death can beat the racket by getting into a hole and never going out. But you ain't got the temperament for that sort of game."

"No," admitted Paul Pry, "I haven't. What's the dope on Gilvray's scout department?"

Mugs Magoo eyed the empty whiskey glass and bottle.

"Go to it," invited Paul Pry.

Mugs Magoo poured another drink.

"A blonde baby with innocent manners and a heart that an acetylene torch couldn't touch. She hangs out at the Green Mill and picks 'em up when they look prosperous. She's got a knack of turning 'em inside out. Then there's a bank clerk in the Tenth Street branch of the Producer's Southern Trust Company. He has access to the statements that are filed by borrowers. When they show enough personal assets for a quick haul he tips off the gang. Then there's a private fence—"

"Hold on, Mugs," said Pry, "you've given me enough right now. Tell me about the blonde."

"Name's Tilly Tanner, puts on a sing and works the tables in between. Nothing crude—smooth stuff. She's a small trick with great big eyes that get wider and wider the more deviltry she plans. She's quite a teaser at that, but she's hooked up with Gilvray pretty tight. I don't know all the connection."

"I see," said Paul Pry. "Is she pretty?"

"Is she pretty? Say, listen, chief, this jane has to get acquainted with a substantial business man in a night club, turn him inside out for all his business secrets, hand him a song and dance that makes him get sympathetic; and put it all on so strong that when Mr. Business Man gets robbed by a gang that have all his affairs at their fingertips, he never even suspects the jane of a tip-off. Is she pretty? My God, she had to be pretty! And how!

"Chief, you lay off that jane. If you contact her, she'll make you want to rescue her from sordid surroundings. I know her!"

Paul Pry laughed.

"But you don't know me, Mugs. Tell me, is there any chance she might recognize me?"

Mugs Magoo shook his head.

"There's only one or two in the gang that have ever seen you. That's the reason you're still buyin' me whiskey. Otherwise, you'd be pushing daisies."

Paul Pry hummed a little tune as he arrayed himself in full dress, saw that his monogrammed case was filled with cigarettes, and tested his sword cane to make certain the blade would draw swift and true.

"I'll let you out the door, Mugs. I want to bar it again. I'd hate to have a gangster waiting here when I returned. Take the bottle with you."

"How you goin' to get out, chief?"

"Oh, I'm not. I'll just spend the evening reading. You might pass that information on to the plainclothes dick that's waiting downstairs."

Mugs Magoo sighed.

"Them white shirt fronts make a wonderful target for a machine gun at night. Be sure and keep your coat buttoned—while you're readin'."

And he tucked the whiskey bottle under his arm and left.

Paul Pry barred the door, sought his secret exit, and went directly to the Green Mill.

He didn't contact Tilly Tanner right at first. But the display of a large roll of bills, lavish expenditures and a certain air of unwilling loneliness eventually brought the blonde girl to his table.

The usual preliminaries were disposed of rapidly and Paul Pry found the deep hazel eyes staring at him in breathless wonder.

"You're so observing, and you're such a good judge of character, I'll bet you're a fine business man!"

Paul Pry lounged back in his chair, his face containing the simpering self-satisfaction which is the normal masculine reaction to feminine praise.

"Well now, let's see, baby, you must be pretty good yourself. How did you know I was a business man? And how did you know I was such a good judge of character?"

She laughed, a throaty, cooing laugh and thrust her parted, red lips toward his face.

"Easy. I'd bet you anything you're a successful business man."

"Anything?" asked Paul Pry.

"Well—almost anything."

Paul Pry let his voice grow husky.

"Ten dollars—against a kiss."

She lowered the lids of her eyes demurely, studied the red fingernails which clutched the snowy cloth.

"You might try to lose the bet," she said; and flashed her eyes to his face in a single, dazzling glance.

Paul Pry laughed.

"What a little mind reader you are! Yes, baby, you're right. I'm the sole manager and owner of the Jeweler's Supply Co., Inc. And, baby, what I do to those jewelers and make 'em like it is a caution. Most of my competitors fight for the city trade, and I let 'em have it. I go out in the sticks and get the hick merchants on my books. After I get 'em where they owe me too much to pay all at once then I start throwing the hooks into 'em.

"I send 'em merchandise that's flawed all to hell, and I stick on a fancy price. They don't dare to squawk or I'd close 'em out. They have to mark up the price and pass the stuff on to the hicks in the small towns.

"What's the result? Here I am throwin' money to the birdies and havin' a good time while my competitors are down explainin' to their bankers why they can't meet their notes.

"Come on, baby, another little drink. I want to see those eyes look at me over the top of a glass again!"

She flashed him another glance, leaned forward, cupped her

chin on her interlaced fingers, and let Paul Pry see an expanse of white throat, eyes that stared in admiration, lips that were parted with a subtle invitation.

"How perfectly wonderful!" she said.

They had another drink, and another.

Tilly Tanner told him of her life, of an invalid mother and a crippled sister, both of whom must be supported. She told him of the characters she met, men who were not "nice men like you," but men who leered and oggled and offended.

She made of herself a martyr, a martyr who was as pure and undefiled as the freshly fallen snow but, nevertheless, one who must continually be exposed to the sordid side of the world.

Paul Pry murmured his manly sympathy and explained that it was because of her great beauty that she attracted the ever-pursuing male.

She studied the reddened tips of her fingers again.

"Just knowing you has helped," she said. "It's been a privilege!"

And, so perfect was the tone of her voice, so helpless the sigh which accompanied the words, that they seemed to ring with sincerity.

She shrugged as though to shake off the mood.

"But I must keep cheerful and smiling. Tell me something—tell me of your business. Do diamonds really cost a lot of money? Do you have to keep a lot of money tied up in stock? And tell me what business men mean when they talk of overhead."

Paul Pry laughed.

"Baby, baby, you'd have me here all night!"

The eyes flashed again.

"Well?" and the tone was low, intimate, inviting.

Paul Pry reached forward as though to take her in his arms, but she drew back, frightened.

"No, no!" she said. Then, after an interval during which the hazel eyes melted into his, "Not here!"

And Paul Pry settled back in his chair.

"Talk to me," she demanded.

Paul Pry talked in a low, husky voice.

"Sweetheart! I'll grab you in my arms and tell the whole world to go to hell. I'll—"

"No, no. Don't talk like that. Please! I've got to sing in a few

minutes, and you'll have my voice all out of control. Talk to me about yourself, about your business! Please!"

Paul Pry sighed.

"Well," he said, "I've told you— Say, you'd get a kick out of a deal I'm pulling tomorrow!"

She leaned forward.

"I'd love it!"

"Well, there's a guy down at Centerville, fellow by the name of Moffit that's got a sucker on the list. Moffit is a jeweler there, and he's got a man that's going to pay fifty thousand for a necklace. And, will you believe it, I've got Moffit so sewed up he don't even dare to get prices from any other competitor.

"That's a fact. I sent down a messenger on the 2:10 interurban this afternoon with a bunch of necklaces and a bracelet. The bracelet was a bauble that sold for a lousy six thousand, but I marked it four thousand so the hick customer would fall for the necklaces.

"But I guess the bird knew stones, all right. He took the bracelet and sent back the necklaces. So I'm sending another bunch on the 2:10 tomorrow. I'm going to give him some real buys. Fifty grand in cash isn't to be sneezed at nowadays."

The girl had stiffened with the tenseness of a cat crawling out toward a bird's nest.

"Will you make a profit?" she asked.

"Baby! Will I make a profit? Don't make me laugh, I got a sore lip!"

Paul Pry's attitude was that of a slightly intoxicated business man expanding under the influence of attractive companionship of the opposite sex.

The girl reached forward with a swift hand and patted the back of his hand.

"You're wonderful!" she said.

"Will I make a profit?" chuckled Paul Pry. "That's good. God, I wish old Moffit could hear you ask that. He'd strangle. Baby, I'll make a cool twenty thousand net. Get that? Net to me!"

She nodded. Her finger was tracing little patterns on the table-cloth. Her mouth drooped with abstraction.

"In cash?" she asked.

"Probably not all at once. But it'll come in."

"Cash—or check?"

"Check, of course."

"Oh."

There was a trace of disappointment in her tone.

"You might lose the sale," she ventured after a while.

"Not me, baby. I'm going to send down an assortment of twenty of the choicest necklaces in the place. I'm going to get my own stock and I'm going to pick up some stuff from the big importers on consignment. I tell you, I'm going to sell that hick."

She got the idea then, and leaned forward, lowering her voice.

"But how about sending them? You'll send an armed guard, or a truck, or something?"

Paul Pry laughed.

"Not me, sister. That's the way to invite trouble. No, sister, when I send out stuff it goes by a messenger with a handbag. He looks just like any ordinary traveler. Nobody ever thinks he'd have a million dollars' worth of sparklers in the bag.

"I've sent stuff around for ten years now and never lost so much as a single stone. The whole trade does. Shucks, you can telephone for gems to be sent to your place, and they'll send out two men and maybe a dick. But if you're a regular retailer the gem men know you're on the up and up. A retailer can telephone for any sort of stuff he wants and it'll come to him either by express or by messenger, depending on where he is and how quick he wants it."

The forefinger was tracing complicated lines on the tablecloth.

"You're going to make all this money tomorrow?"

"You bet, baby. I'm sending my man on the 2:10 train. He'll be back with the unsold gems sometime later. I don't know just what train he'll take. He may have some cash with him, so I'll probably have the local police give him an escort back. But as far as the gems are concerned, they're insured, and they'll be handled just like you'd handle a bag full of clothes."

She watched him with eyes that were so wide and deep they fairly radiated innocence.

"But I'll bet you have a great big, husky man as a messenger!"

"Wrong again, baby. He's just a young fellow, tall and thin."

"You must dress him in inconspicuous clothes."

"No. He wears just ordinary clothes. He usually wears a red tie, and a blue striped suit."

"I'll bet you fool them on the bag. I'll bet you make it look cheap and battered, so no one would suspect it held a lot of gems."

Paul Pry twisted his glass.

"Baby, you might have a good idea there, at that. But you're wrong again. I let him carry a black handbag. It's studded with brass rivets so it'd be easy to identify if anybody tried to grab it. But, aside from that, it's just an ordinary bag, and it's in pretty good shape."

She frowned, let her eyes drift to her fingertips again. All of a sudden she was on her feet.

"I've almost forgot an appointment with the manager over a new song I'm trying out. I must run. Bye-bye."

And she was gone with a flash of graceful legs, a flutter of flouncing ruffles, and a languishing glance over her bare shoulder.

Paul Pry waited for ten minutes.

At the end of that time a waiter informed him that Miss Tanner had been summoned to the bedside of her mother, who had been taken violently ill. She wished to be excused, and to ask the gentleman to please come back some other evening.

Paul Pry showed the proper amount of concern over the condition of the mother, the proper amount of irritation at having a conquest snatched from him, and, walking rather carefully as though the alcohol had rendered him a little unsure of his footing, left the night club.

Paul Pry purchased two bags at a store which specialized in such articles. He left orders that the small black bag was to be studded with brass rivets.

The large, tan bag he took with him

He purchased a package of fish hooks and some small rivets. When he had finished with the large tan bag it looked perfectly conventional from the outside. But that was as far as conventionality went.

The bottom had been entirely removed, and the interior had been so studded with fish hooks as to make the bag highly

effective for a certain purpose, and utterly useless for any other purpose.

When Paul Pry had fixed the bags to suit himself, he telephoned to Moffit at Centerville.

"Moffit, this is Garfield. I've been thinking over the necklace, and I'm going to give your wholesaler another chance. I promised you I would, and I'm going to keep that promise, although I'm disgusted with his treatment.

"Get him on the telephone and tell him to have an assortment of first-class stuff sent to you. He'll have to get it there on the next interurban, though, because I'm going to leave town tonight.

"It's 1:15, and he can get a messenger on the 2:10 train. I'll be there when the train gets in and let you know one way or the other within ten minutes after I see the necklaces."

And Paul Pry shut off the voluble thanks of the jeweler, hung up the telephone, and gave his attention to certain details of transportation, which included an appointment with the pilot of the fastest plane the city could command.

These details were all arranged by two o'clock. At precisely two nine and one half, Paul Pry rushed through the gates at the interurban depot. In his hands were two bags, one a yellow bag that had no bottom, the other a black bag studded with brass studs.

They held the car for him to get aboard.

His eyes sought for, and found, a slender figure immersed in the sporting page of the afternoon paper. The car started with a lurch as Paul Pry hesitated, opposite the seat occupied by this man.

The lurch of the car threw Paul Pry off balance.

He lunged to one side, toppled, threw out the hand containing the yellow bag for support. That bag smashed down upon the seat, squarely over the black one already there, His head butted into the chest of the man who was reading the sporting page.

That individual got into action quickly.

He was on his feet in a single swift motion. The afternoon paper was dashed to the floor. The man's right hand swung to his hip pocket. Then, as he saw a black bag, studded with brass rivets, his right hand hesitated.

"What the devil?" he growled.

"I'm going to sue the railroad company!" bellowed Paul Pry. "You're a witness. Give me your name and address."

The slender man retrieved the black bag, held his hand protectingly upon it.

"Aw go sit on a tack," he invited. "You can't use these cars as a promenade while they're goin'. Sit down and shut up."

The conducter hurried forward, took Paul Pry by the shoulders, guided him to a vacant seat, sought to soothe his ruffled feelings. It was the conductor himself who fetched the yellow bag from the seat where Paul Pry had collided with the slender man.

And that individual, as though suspicious of further interference, transferred the black, brass-studded bag to the window side of the seat, smoothed out the rumpled newspaper, glowered about him, and returned to the sporting page.

Twenty minutes later the car made its first stop, and Paul Pry walked quietly down the aisle, stepped to the platform and walked to a waiting car. The car whisked him toward a level field where a squat plane awaited, engine already warmed up. The forward cockpit was piled with suitcases, and Paul Pry managed to insinuate himself in between three suitcases, adjusted a helmet and nodded.

The plane seemed to roar into life like a frightened quail. It scuttled down some hundred feet of the field, went into the air on a sharp incline, zipped upward, and within a matter of seconds was but a dot against the blue.

Precisely fourteen minutes later, Paul Pry was transferring his baggage at the Centerville airport from the plane to automobile. Another six minutes and he was at the hotel, the porter glancing at the baggage with a look of admiration of his features.

"By gosh!" he blurted, "I'll say you're a wonder when it comes to getting action, Mr. Garfield."

Paul Pry grinned.

"I shook 'em up. Bring the baggage up to my room."

And he went to his room, took down the telephone and called Moffit.

"I'm in my room, ready packed, Mr. Moffit. I'm leaving on the 6:20 train. I wish you'd bring the necklaces over as soon as they arrive."

"I certainly will, Mr. Garfield," promised Moffit.

Paul Pry cleared his throat.

"Look here, Moffit, there's another matter I wanted to mention to you. Last night I mentioned to a casual acquaintance—a young lady—that I was arranging to have some stones sent down to you today. I didn't mention where from or on what train. But she showed a marked interest that was a little too marked.

"I can't tell you who this young woman was. Frankly, I met her in a picture show and struck up an acquaintance with her. She sat next to me, and—well, I felt from the way she laughed, and the sidelong glances she directed at me, that she wouldn't object to my speaking to her.

"Now I've been worried about that. I've heard gangsters sometimes use women as scouts. I wish you'd tell Chief Kelley, and have him arrange to have another officer with him when he meets the interurban. I'm worried."

Moffit laughed.

"Forget it. The stones are all insured. I'll take care we have ample protection after we get the gems. Before that, it's up to the wholesaler and the insurance company. But no one ever thinks of bothering these gem messengers. They move stuff around without ever losing a single stone—"

Paul Pry sighed, and the relief that was contained in that sigh was apparent, even over the telephone.

"I'm so relieved to hear you say so. You don't think there's any necessity of putting a guard on the interurban, do you?"

"Heaven's no. Forget it, Mr. Garfield!"

"Thank you," said Paul Pry meekly, and hung up.

The porter arrived with the baggage, and Paul Pry held him in the room for several minutes, getting the baggage placed to his liking, keeping up a running fire of conversation.

It was precisely 3:21 when the interurban which was due to arrive in Centerville at 3:38, slowed to a stop at a little flag station which was really nothing more than a milk-shipping depot.

Two well-dressed men were waiting. It was the first time the motorman could remember picking up a passenger at the station, but the time-table made of this little depot a flag stop, and so he applied the air brakes, and brought the car to a stop.

The two men swung up to the platform. The motorman noticed a touring car with the side curtains up. That car was parked on the dirt road near the depot.

"Car trouble?" asked the motorman, grinning.

"You bet," said one of the men, and made a swift motion with his right hand.

A slungshot flipped out from his wrist, crushed through the cap of the motorman and thudded against his skull. The motorman lurched against the controls, and thudded to the floor.

A woman screamed.

The conductor, not observing the commotion, rang the "go ahead" bell. A man shouted a hoarse warning. A slender individual who had been reading a newspaper, tugged at something in his hip pocket.

His startled eyes saw a man standing directly before him, a crooked grin twisting his features, a heavy automatic in his right hand.

"When you get it out, buddy," he said, "drop it on the floor."

The slender individual hesitated.

"Make it snappy. Drop it on the floor. You ain't paid to stop lead, and I mean business."

The second gangster stood at the end of the car.

"Keep your seats, everybody," he yelled.

The slender young man slowly withdrew a steel weapon and tossed it to the floor.

The man with the automatic kicked the gun under the seats and picked up the black bag, studded with brass rivets.

"Thanks," he said, laconically. "Let's go, Steve!"

They went on the run. From behind the side curtains of the automobile the muzzle of a machine gun covered their retreat.

And just before they left the car, they opened the electric control, jerked the brass lever from the control box and flung it away. As the car gathered headway, they dropped to the ground.

The interurban was jolting and swaying as the passengers screamed for help. By the time the conductor had managed to check the speed of the careening car, the milk depot was a mile behind.

The conductor piloted the car to a place where a farmhouse showed telephone wires running to it. He checked the car to a stop and ran toward the house.

The telephone buzzed out the news, spreading the alarm. Central located the chief of police of Centerville, and gave him the message.

Chief Kelley informed Moffit of what had happened.

"Good heavens, then he was right, and we should have arranged for a guard!"

"Information came too late, anyhow," said Kelley, but his eyes shifted uneasily. "I gotta get busy and throw out a blockade in case they should try to come through town here."

"They won't," said Moffit. "Look here, chief, if the wholesaler thought I'd been tipped off there might be trouble with that shipment."

"Uh-huh," grunted Kelley. "The newspapers would make things rather warm for me if they thought I'd been warned and laughed at the warning. That's the hell of being in this game. If you guess right you don't get credit. If you guess wrong they pan you from here to Timbuctoo."

The men exchanged glances.

"Yeah," said Chief Kelley, "I'll get a man to take charge of closin' the road. I'm goin' up there with you."

Ten minutes later they marched down the corridor to Paul Pry's hotel room.

Paul Pry flung open the door.

"Well, well, you were long enough getting here. The interurban must have been in ten minutes ago."

Chief Kelley kicked the door closed.

"Look here, Garfield, you can help us."

Paul Pry smiled affably.

"Certainly. What can I do?"

"Forget that you warned us there might be a stick-up of the messenger who was carryin' those jewels. Forget that you talked to a broad in a picture show. Take your money that Moffit's got for you, and get out of town."

Paul Pry let his jaw sag.

"Do you mean to tell me the man was robbed?"

"Grabbed the bag slick as a whistle. Evidently a tipped-off job. They knew what they wanted, who had it, and what was in it. They went and got it."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Paul Pry. "Anybody hurt?"

"Just the insurance company," said Chief Kelley.

"And a greedy wholesaler," muttered Moffit bitterly. "I hope his loss wasn't covered."

"My, my, my! Then that woman—"

Kelley interrupted.

"Forget about that woman," he said.

"And the gems," added Moffit.

"And get outa town before the newspaper chaps start coming around," supplemented Kelley.

"Oh gracious, the newspaper men won't ask a lot of questions will they?"

"They will if they catch you here. Get started if you want to avoid a lot of flashlight pictures and all that line of hooey."

Paul Pry rang for the porter.

"Gentleman," he assured them, "I'm on my way."

"I got your money," said Moffit. "That's what took us so long. Sorry I couldn't make a deal, but I'm satisfied with the bracelet, anyway."

Paul Pry gravely shook hands.

Out in a suburban house, a house that was really a well-protected fortress, Benjamin Franklin Gilvray, otherwise known as Big Front Gilvray, stared stupidly at "Chopper" Nelson.

"You mean—you mean—"

Nelson opened a black bag studded with brass rivets.

"So help me God, chief, that's every damned thing that was in it—just that paper."

"Then the whole thing was a plant just to give us a run-around!"

Chopper Nelson shook his head.

"No. There was more to it than that. The youngster really thought he had a million dollars' worth of rocks in that bag. I could tell by the way he went for his rod."

Big Front Gilvray spread the paper on his knee with fingers that shook.

"Dear Goosie," said the message. "Thanks for another egg."

"Another egg," said Gilvray, his voice quivering. "Do you s'pose he—"

The answer to this question was not conveyed to him until two weeks later when he read in the papers that Inspector Oakley had managed to recover all of the diamond necklaces taken from a messenger of the Jewelers' Supply Co., Inc.

The inspector was congratulated for his efficient work. The article mentioned that he was also richer by a reward of fifteen

thousand dollars for the recovery of the stones, posted by the insurance company and the wholesaler.

And Big Front Gilvray, knowing full well that Inspector Oakley was splitting that reward two ways, half to the inspector, half to Paul Pry, paced the floor in such an ecstasy of rage that even the hardened gangsters cowered in the rooms of the suburban fortress and kept out of Gilvray's way.

B.F. Gilvray might be a big noise in the underworld. To Paul Pry he was merely a goosie laying golden eggs.

Slick and Clean

Death awaited him in that mysterious chamber—death from three blunt-nosed guns. Yet Paul Pry only smiled as he hurried toward it. When a fellow has been put on the spot, the least he can do is to be on time for the works.

1

Screams in the Dark

The girl emerged from the underbrush by the river road, stood where the headlights of the automobile fell full upon her white face, and screamed with stark terror.

Such clothes as she had worn had been ripped to shreds. There were bruises on her arms and chest. The white skin of her body was scratched where brush had scraped against it as she had plunged headlong in mad terror.

Her eyes were staring, dark with fear. Her face was pale to the lips. One well-formed leg protruded through a rip which ran from the hem of her skirt to the hip. Her hands were upraised, palms outward, and ostentatiously empty.

But Paul Pry did not bring his automobile to an immediate stop. Big Front Gilvray, arch-gangster, had decreed that Paul Pry be placed on the spot, and the decree had been overlong in execution.

The sixteen cylinder automobile which Paul Pry was driving was no mere sedan, as its appearance would indicate. It was built

of armor which would stop a rifle bullet, and the windows were of bullet-proof glass.

Several slight indentations in the armor of the body bore witness to a previous attempt on the part of the gangsters to carry out the orders of their vengeful chief. But the machine gun had failed to penetrate and Paul Pry had lived to take his powerful car out for an evening drive on the river road.

And because it was more than probable that this screaming woman might well be the bait with which some trap was to be sprung, Paul Pry ran his automobile some fifty yards past her before he brought it to a stop. Then he switched off all lights, took the butt of his automatic in his hand, and opened the door.

"Do you want help?" he called.

And, as his hail was swallowed up in the dark shadows of the brush which rimmed the road, Paul Pry listened, his every sense alert.

The screams of the woman came to his ears. They were steady, high-pitched, mechanical screams. Such screams might a woman give who had gone into hysterics, then worn down her emotions through a sheer ecstasy of fear until fatigue had taken a hand and made of the screams a regular rhythm of unconscious effort.

Paul Pry called to her again, and the call was unanswered. But the screams became louder. She was running toward him.

Paul pry left the door open. He started the purring power of the sixteen cylinder motor, waited.

She was still screaming as she blocked the door of the automobile.

"Get in," said Paul Pry.

The woman scrambled in the car. Paul Pry snapped in the clutch so suddenly that the forward lunge of the machine slammed the door shut. His headlights snapped on, and he also clicked on the dome light—just to make sure that those hands remained empty.

They were still empty, beseeching hands that clung to his coat with the grip of hysteria. The screams ceased, and, in their place, came sobs, heart-wrenching sobs which would eventually bring solace to the overtaxed nerves.

Paul Pry drove his machine for nearly a mile, then turned up a side road and stopped. He disengaged his left hand from the steering wheel, turned toward her.

She grabbed him, flung her slender body close to his as a drowning woman will grasp at the form of a rescuer. Paul Pry slid his right arm around her waist. She pressed a tear-stained cheek to his, sobbed out unintelligible words.

Paul Pry patted the bare shoulder, attempted to soothe her. Gradually his words impressed themselves upon her senses and the throbbing quieted. She snuggled to him as a kitten might snuggle to a warm brick, dropped her head upon his shoulder, and lapsed into a semi-conscious condition which seemed half sleep, half stupor.

Paul Pry, engine idling for a quick getaway if occasion should require, lights switched off, right hand within quick reaching distance of his automatic, maintained watchful silence.

After some ten minutes she straightened. Her muscles seemed more relaxed. Her hands ceased to claw at his garments.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"The name," he said, "Pry. You seemed to be pretty much frightened."

She flung herself to him as he reminded her of her fright. Then, as his hand slid along the bare skin of her back where the garments had been torn, she gasped and flung herself away, modesty asserting itself.

She explored the damage to her garments with questing fingers.

"Isn't there a light in the car?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Paul Pry, "there is a dome light."

"Turn it on."

He snapped the switch.

As the light showed her the extent of her figure which was readily visible through the torn garments, she stifled a little scream.

"Turn it off!" she cried.

Paul Pry switched off the light.

"Haven't you a robe or something?"

"I have an overcoat in the back of the car. I'll get it."

"Don't bother," she said, and was over the back of the seat with a motion as lithe as that of a wildcat stalking from cover to cover.

Paul Pry turned on the light again.

"On the robe rail," he said.

"O.K., big boy, keep your head turned."

There was a rustle of garments.

"That's better," she said. "Lord, what a spectacle I must have been! Did you find me in the road?"

"You came to the road and stopped me."

"Where are we now?"

"About a mile from where I picked you up."

"Let's get out of here—quick!"

"Do you want to tell me about it? That is, can I help?" asked Paul Pry.

She climbed back over the seat, gathered the overcoat about her legs, wrapped it around her breast, grinned.

"O.K. Gimme a cigarette. Guess I must have gone off my nut for a while."

"You had hysterics."

"Maybe. I ain't the type that can't stand the gaff, but that was too much. They were taking me for a ride."

Paul Pry handed her the electric cigarette lighter. She inhaled a great drag from the cigarette, blew out the smoke in twin streams from appreciative nostrils, sighed.

"Let's go," she said.

Paul Pry nosed the car over the rough road, found a good place to turn, swung the big machine around, headed back to the highway, and purred into speed.

"Shoot," he said.

She cocked her head on one side, regarded him with quizzical eyes. They were, he saw, blue eyes, eyes that held a sort of light in their depths, a puzzling, challenging light. Her lips were half parted, and pearly teeth glinted invitingly. Her head was tilted back and up, and the long line of her throat, stretching down to where his overcoat lapels parted, showed with the gleam of pure ivory.

"I'm not a *good* girl," she said, and watched him.

Paul Pry laughed.

"What is this, a confession?"

She took another drag at the cigarette, shook her head, removed the paper cylinder and smiled frankly.

"No, but I don't want to get you in bad, and I wanted to tell you the worst at the start. I'm a gangster's moll—or I was. I've

helped rum-runners load and unload, and I've seen a hijacking or two."

Paul Pry did not seem greatly surprised.

"So," she stressed, "I'm not what you'd call a 'good' girl."

Paul Pry's eyes were on the road ahead.

"The habit of classifying all women as either 'good' or 'bad' went out of fashion ten or fifteen years ago—thank heavens!" he said.

She sighed.

"I'm glad you feel that way. You see, I was the moll of Harry the Dip, and they took me for a ride. Maybe you read about it in yesterday's paper. Well, they thought I might get sore and squeal, so they decided to take me for a ride.

"I was to visit a girl friend and stay with her for a while. She said she'd send a friend in his car. God, she double-crossed me! Damn her. I'll claw her eyes out. Well, that's about all there was to it. This 'friend' jabbed a gun in my ribs. The car stopped and picked up another man. They took me out on the river road, turned up a side road, found a place that suited them, and got ready to bump me off.

"But I got a break. One of them sort of fell for me. I got to playing them one against the other, watched my chance and jumped into the brush. They both shot at me half a dozen times, and I guess the fear and the running and all that just sent me off my nut. I don't remember anything else until I found myself pulling the cry-baby act on your shoulder. Was I a nuisance?"

"Not at all," said Paul Pry.

She sighed.

"God, it's awful lonesome with Harry gone!"

Paul Pry made no comment. The blue eyes flashed up and down his profile. The overcoat fell away on one side, disclosing a large expanse of shapely limb. But the eyes of Paul Pry, narrowed into calculating slits, remained on the road.

Slowly, with a tardiness that was almost an invitation, the girl replaced the flap of the overcoat and regarded him thoughtfully.

"Are you afraid of getting mixed up with the gangs just for rescuing me?"

Paul Pry answered that at once.

"No," he said.

"I didn't think you would be."

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Louise Eckhart," she told him. Then, after a moment, "My friends call me Lou."

"Where do you want to go, Lou?"

She smiled up at him.

"I like you," she said.

He nodded. "Where to?" he repeated.

"I've got a suitcase parked at the Union Depot. I did have the check in my stocking. Wonder if it's gone?"

She pulled the overcoat to one side, searched the tops of her stockings, first the right, then the left. She handed him a crumpled bit of pasteboard.

"That's luck. I can get some clothes. Would you mind driving to the depot, getting the suitcase, and then driving me where I can dress?"

"Not at all," said Paul Pry. "I'd better get some gasoline if we're going that far, though. I'm about out."

They were approaching the junction of the river road with the through boulevard, and the lights of gasoline stations flung themselves out across the darkness.

The girl sighed.

"You," she proclaimed, "are a regular guy."

Paul Pry made no comment. He drove into a gasoline station.

"Fill her up," he told the attendant, and walked to the telephone, gave the number of his apartment, and heard the voice of "Mugs" Magoo on the telephone.

"Drunk, Mugs?"

"Not yet. Gimme ten minutes more an' I will be."

"Forget it. Take a drink of water and chase down to the Union Depot. I'm going to drive in there with a moll. Manage to give her the once-over and see if you place her. Then go back to the apartment. I'll meet you there."

Mugs Magoo grunted.

"I'll do it all for you—all except take the drink of water," he remarked. "Water's poison to my system," and he clicked the receiver back in place.

2

The Goose Cackles

Paul Pry paid the attendant. The girl watched him with shrewd eyes. "Telling the wife you were detained at the office?" she asked.

"No wife."

"Betcha I'm making you miss a heavy date, then."

Paul Pry grinned.

"It's worth it."

He got into the car, drove rapidly and skillfully through the traffic, parked in front of the Union Depot, handed a red-cap porter the crumpled pasteboard and a half dollar.

"At the check stand," he said. "Make it snappy."

And Paul Pry watched the face of the girl at his side to see if she was at all nonplussd at his failure to call for the suitcase in person. If she was, she failed to show it.

Paul Pry was red hot. It might well be that the sole function of this girl was to get him on the spot in front of the checking stand at the Union Depot.

Mugs Magoo walked past.

His glassy eyes flicked once toward the automobile, then turned away. He walked awkwardly, dressed in shabby clothes, his right arm gone at the shoulder.

At one time he had known every crook in the underworld, and his information was now hardly less complete. He had been "camera-eye" man for the metropolitan police. A political shake-up, an accident which cost him his right arm, and bad booze, had made him a human derelict selling pencils in the gutter.

Paul Pry had "discovered" him, and organized a strange partnership. For Mugs Magoo never forgot a name, a face or a connection. While Paul Pry was an opportunist de luxe who lived by his wits. And of late he had chosen to exercise those wits in a battle against Benjamin Franklin Gilvray, known to the police as Big Front Gilvray.

For years Big Front Gilvray had grown in power and prestige. The police knew him as a big man, too powerful to tackle, a gangster who was always in the background, letting his minions do the dirty work of murder and plunder. The police hated Gilvray, and they feared him.

To Paul Pry, Big Front Gilvray was merely the goose which laid his golden eggs.

The red cap returned with a suitcase, deposited it in the car. Paul Pry drove away into the stream of traffic.

"Gosh," said the girl. "I can't change in here. You're sort of one of the family, but these windows are too wide. I don't want to give the whole damned city a treat."

Paul Pry nodded.

"We will go to a safe place," he said.

And he meant what he said. He had no intention of letting this girl open that suitcase, take out a gun and pull the trigger.

He took her to a cheap hotel, engaged a suite of connecting rooms, took her up to those rooms, and closed the door while she engaged in the process of changing her clothes.

When she rejoined him in the bedroom, Paul Pry was ready for anything in the line of attack. But there was nothing. She smiled gratefully at him.

"Kid," she said, giving him her hand, "here's where we part. I ain't asked you nothing about yourself, but I have an idea you're a big shot on the lam, maybe from Chi. It's easy enough

to see that you're about half sold on the idea that I am a lure to put you on the spot.

"But you've been a gent, and you've treated me white. I'm going out. I won't see you again. Tonight at eleven o'clock I've got to go up against the most dangerous thing I've ever tackled. If you read in the papers about me being found with a lot of lead in me, remember that I was thinkin' of you when I cashed in.

"You've given me a chance, and you've been on the up and up. Want to drive me downtown?"

He nodded. "You'll stay here tonight?"

"If I come through alive."

"Must you run into it?"

"Yes. I'm meeting a big shot of the Gilvray gang in the Mandarin Cafe. He's got Room 13 reserved. If I can get what I want I'll walk in and walk out inside of five minutes. If I ain't out by then I'll never come out. But I've got to go. That big shot has something I've got to have."

Paul Pry lit a cigarette.

"Just you and he alone?" he asked.

"That's the bargain. I wouldn't deal any other way. It's a long chance, but I'm taking it. Big Front Gilvray doesn't waste any love on me. My man was a thorn in his flesh. He'd like to give me the works. But he needs me in his business. He's pulling a job that they've got to have a moll on that knows the ropes. I'm elected. I can deliver the goods. The other molls can't.

"I wish to God Harry hadn't been bumped. Then I wouldn't worry. If I had a man to cover me, I'd walk in there. If I wasn't out in five minutes my man could brush in through the curtains with his rod ready, and take me out.

"The Gilvray gangster's yellow. He's Chick Bender. Used to be a mouthpiece until he got disbarred. Now he's the brains of the gang, but he's got no guts."

Paul Pry nodded.

"Yes, I've heard of Chick Bender."

The girl yawned and pulled her cupped hands along the contour of her leg, frankly straightening the seam in her stocking without bothering to turn her back.

"Yeah," she remarked. "You ain't heard anything good about him."

Paul Pry switched off the lights. "You have the keys," he said.

She kissed him in the dark.

"Baby, you're a regular guy. Wish I knew you better. Maybe you'd help me give the Gilvray gang a double-crossing that would make a fortune for us. God, I wish Harry hadn't got on the spot."

Paul Pry patted her shoulder.

"What time's the appointment?"

"Eleven. Wish me luck."

"You've got it. It's early yet. Want to drive around?"

"No, just dump me—tell you what, big boy, if you want to see more of me, stick around the Mandarin about five after eleven. If I come through O.K. I'll give you a tumble. If I get bumped you can forget about me."

Her blue eyes were wistful.

"I'd sure like to see more of you," she added.

Paul Pry smiled at her.

"Perhaps, if you find yourself in danger, you may find me sticking around."

"You mean it?"

"Perhaps."

Her arms twined around his neck in a fierce embrace.

Mugs Magoo emptied the glass of whiskey with a single motion of the left arm. His glassy eyes fastened upon Paul Pry in emotionless appraisal.

"You got no business here," he said.

Paul Pry laughed, entered the apartment and closed the steel door.

"Why so? Isn't it my apartment?"

"Yeah. I guess so, but you ain't got no business being here. You'd oughta be out pushing daisies. You got a date with the undertaker. How'd you break it?"

Paul Pry took off his top coat and hat, came over and sat down.

"Meaning?" he said.

Mugs Magoo poured himself another drink of whiskey.

"Meaning that the moll was Maude Ambrose. She went by the nickname of Maude the Musher in Chi. That's because she's got such a good line of mush. She usually lets a guy rescue her from some danger or other. Then she gets mushy over him and finally puts him on the spot."

Paul Pry lit a cigarette. Twin devils were dancing in his eyes.

"She's nothing but a kid," he objected.

"Kid, hell! She's a kidder."

"You think she's tied up with Gilvray's gang?"

Mugs Magoo sighed, poured himself a drink of whiskey, gazed at the bottle ruefully.

"Hell," he said, "it's a cinch. You never would follow my advice. First you twist Gilvray's tail into a knot, and then instead of crawlin' into a hole an' pullin' the hole in after you, you start raggin' hell outa Gilvray.

"Nobody's goin' to stand that. An' then, on top of it all, you drive around just like you was any ordinary citizen out for a little air. Gilvray's found out your car is bullet proof. He's fixed up somethin' else for you. Maude the Musher!

"I presume you found her in her undies, just climbin' from the river where she claimed somebody'd tried to drown her, didn't you? That's her best line, getting all roughed up and losin' most of her clothes, then fallin' on the neck of the guy she's ropin' and gettin' mushy."

Paul Pry puffed at the cigarette with every evidence of enjoyment.

"You have described almost exactly what happened, Mugs."

Mugs Magoo blinked his glassy expressionless eyes.

"Yeah. Her man's in town, too."

"Her man?"

"Yeah, Charles Simmons. They call him Charley the Checker, because he always works a suitcase checking racket wherever he goes. He's bought into the checking concession at the Union Depot. That's where the jane had her suitcase parked.

"When you handed the red cap the ticket for that suitcase it was her way of lettin' her man know that you'd fallen for her line. So they got the spot ready for you.

"I didn't ever expect to see you again. So I came back an' tried to get drunk. But I can't make the grade. Not yet, I can't. I ain't had but about an hour, though."

And Mugs Magoo poured the last of the whiskey in the quart bottle into the glass, tossed it off, looked significantly at the empty bottle, then at Paul Pry.

That individual laughed, took a key from his pocket, tossed it to Mugs.

"Here's the key to the whiskey safe. Go as far as you like, Mugs. I'm to be put on the spot tonight at eleven."

"Huh, she put it off that long, eh?"

"Yes. I'm to be punctured at Room 13 at the Mandarin Cafe at exactly eleven-five."

Mugs Magoo blinked his glassy eyes rapidly.

"Then you keep off the streets tonight. You stay right here."

Paul Pry consulted his thin watch.

"On the contrary, Mugs, I think I shall be on my way to keep my appointment with the undertaker."

He got to his feet.

"You mean you're goin' to fall for Maude the Musher an' walk on the spot?"

Paul Pry nodded.

"Yes. I rather think I have use for this girl you call Maude the Musher She offers a point of contact with the Gilvray gang. And I have a hunch they're about ready to do something."

Mugs Magoo's jaw sagged.

"Do something— Hell, you don't mean—"

Paul Pry nodded as he wrapped a scarf about his neck.

"Exactly, Mugs. I have decided to let the goosie lay another golden egg."

And Paul Pry was gone, the door slamming shut with a clicking of spring locks and bolts.

"I," observed Mugs Magoo, "will be damned!"

He blinked incredulous eyes at the door through which Paul Pry had vanished, and then bestirred himself to go to the safe where the whiskey was kept.

"I better get plenty while the stuff is here," he observed to himself, his tongue getting a little thick. "Dealin' with an administrator is goin' to be hell!"

3

Embrace of Death

Charles Simmons, known in Chicago as Charley the Checker, sat in Room 13 at the Mandarin Cafe with a heavy caliber revolver on his lap. His right hand rested within a few inches of the gun butt.

Back of him, well to the right, sat Chick Bender, the disbarred lawyer, brains of the Gilvray gang. He was a hatchet-faced man with cold eyes, and the habit of constantly blinking and sniffing. His long bony nose twitched and sniffed, sniffed and twitched. Occasionally he sucked his under lip between his teeth and chewed on it nervously. He was ill at ease.

The girl sat at the table, her chin resting on her cupped hands, her blue eyes twinkling with lazy humor.

"So he fell? You're sure he fell?" asked Chick Bender.

The girl laughed, a throaty laugh of voluptuous abandon.

"Hell, yes," she said.

Charley the Checker glanced at his watch.

"He's supposed to be bad medicine, awful fast with a gun."

The girl's voice drawled out an insult.

"Gettin' yellow?"

The gangster sneered at her.

"Don't get fresh or you'll get knocked for a loop. You're getting altogether too certain of what a hell of a swell moll you are lately."

"Yeah?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, and swept his right arm in a backhanded sweep. The knuckles caught her full on the chin and swept her head back, leaving a red spot on her lip where the teeth had bit through the skin.

Chick Bender stirred uneasily, frowning.

The girl's eyes flashed, but she choked back the words that came to her lips.

"Remember," warned Chick Bender. "Have your gun all ready. Don't give him a chance to get organized. Shoot as soon as he comes through the door."

A clock boomed the hour of eleven.

Below the green curtain appeared the silken pajamas of a Chinese waiter. The foot showed the typical shoe of the Chinese.

"You leady eatum?" asked a singsong voice as the waiter pushed through the curtain, set pots of tea on the table, put down bowls filled with thin rice cakes, each cake containing a printed slip of paper upon which had been printed an optimistic forecast of the future.

Charley the Checker slowly moved his right hand back.

"Yeah, but wait about ten minutes before you bring the rest of the stuff. Maybe somebody else comes."

"All light," said the waiter, and shuffled from the room.

The clock clacked off seconds which became minutes. Chick Bender lit a cigarette with a hand which shook. Charley the Checker looked at his watch and grunted.

"What the hell. It's seven after eleven right now. I bet you fell down on the job, Maude."

The girl sucked the blood from her lip.

"I hope to God I did," she snapped.

Charley the Checker sneered. "It'll give you what you've been needin' for a long while when we get done with this guy," he said. "Now remember the getaway, you guys—"

He broke off as footsteps sounded along the rough board floor. His hand crept down to his gun.

"I'm goin' to let him have it as soon as he steps in," he said. "Get ready. We ain't takin' any chances with this baby."

The footsteps drew nearer, seemed to hesitate for a moment, then the form loomed against the curtain. Charley the Checker raised his right hand, the gun concealed beneath a napkin. The girl leaned forward, lips parted, eyes gleaming. Chick Bender pressed himself back against his chair as though to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

The curtains bulged inward as a form pressed against it, pushed it to one side. And Charley sighed, lowered his hand. Chick Bender took a deep breath. The girl's lips came together.

For the legs which were visible beneath the green of the curtain were encased in silken pajamas, and the shoes were those of the Chinese, flat, formless shoes topped with black velvet upon which were embroidered red and green dragons.

The curtain came to one side. A huge tray, piled high with smoking dishes, obscured the upper portion of the waiter.

It was the girl who first noticed that the hand which held the tray was not yellow, but white. She gasped. Charley the Checker, his own eyes caught by some incongruity of costume, streaked his hand up from under the table.

At that precise moment Paul Pry lowered one end of the tray and the steaming dishes, the boiling soup, the hot tea, all cascaded down upon the gangster.

Red-hot chicken noodles caught him on a level with his throat. The soup drained down his collar, the noodles festooned themselves about his collar and down his vest, looping over the vest buttons.

A pot of hot tea fell squarely on his lap. Egg *foo yung ha* dropped onto his head and slipped back down his collar. He screamed with pain and leaned forward.

Paul Pry flipped his right hand over and down.

There was a rubber slungshot suspended from his wrist. It thunked upon the top of the gangster's head, and Charley the Checker became as utterly inert as a half-emptied sack of meal.

Chick Bender was on his feet, his eyes glassy, hands clawing nervously at his hip. Paul Pry scooped up a tea pot from the table and flung it with unerring aim.

The gangster tried to dodge, failed, and staggered back under the impetus of the blow. Hot tea dashed over him. He tore

frantically at his garments as the hot liquid soaked through to the skin.

Paul Pry's right wrist arced through the air and Chick Bender stretched his length upon the floor. There were running steps. A yellow face surveyed the wreckage through the green curtain, uttered a wild volley of chattering words and disappeared.

Paul Pry grinned at the woman.

It took her a full breath to adjust herself to the suddenly changed situation. For an instant she seemed on the point of flashing her hand to her breast for some weapon. Paul Pry's voice steadied her.

"They double-crossed you, kid. I found out there were two of 'em in the room. You had told me your bargain called for meeting Chick Bender alone. Then when you didn't come out in five minutes like you said you would, I knew there was something wrong, and I came to rescue you."

The girl nodded. Slowly, a smile came over her features.

"My hero!" exclaimed Maude the Musher.

Paul Pry worked fast.

"You said one of them had something you wanted?"

Maude the Musher had not been entirely certain just what it was she had told Paul Pry, but she nodded affirmation. It was time when it was best to agree to anything.

Paul Pry dropped to his knees in front of Chick Bender. His hands parted the tea-soaked garments, went exploring in to the still hot pockets.

He pulled out a roll of bills, a wallet which contained papers, a note-book. Then he turned to Charley the Checker. Once more his hands darted through the pockets with uncanny skill and a swift precision which cut minutes to seconds, seconds to split fractions.

His collection of miscellaneous papers was augmented by another sheaf of currency, more letters and note-books.

"Let's go," said Paul Pry.

Maude the Musher had fully adjusted herself to the situation by this time. The trap had failed, but the bait was still good. It remained for her to string Paul Pry along until he could once more be lured on a hot spot.

"Dearest!" she said, and clutched him to her.

Paul Pry fought loose from the embrace.

"We've no time to lose," he said.

There was the sound of running feet in the corridor, the jabbering of many voices. A police whistle shrilled from the pavement. Paul Pry took the rolled currency which had come from Chick Bender, tossed it to one of the yellow men who led the procession.

"To pay for damage," he said.

The beady black eyes fastened upon the denomination of the outer bill in that roll, and suddenly widened with glittering glee. The man's swift fingers appraised the roll, called out sentences in the singsong Cantonese dialect, and a lane opened through which Paul Pry and the girl traveled.

There were heavy feet on the stairs.

"Police no likum," said Paul Pry.

The Chinaman who clutched the roll of bills nodded his head.

"Heavy savvy," he said. "You come."

He guided them through tortuous passages, up and down dark staircases until they finally reached the street at a point some two blocks from the Mandarin Cafe.

Paul Pry called a cab.

"Sweetheart!" said Maude the Musher, and burrowed into his embrace. "I've never known a man like you, never, never, never!"

Paul Pry patted her shoulder.

The taxi rumbled through traffic, found its way to the hotel where Paul Pry had engaged the suite of rooms. He and the girl went up in the rickety elevator. Paul Pry unlocked the door, stood back for the girl to enter. She walked into his room, switched on the light, smiled at him.

"Dearest," she said, a catch in her voice, her eyes starry, "you've made me love you!"

Paul Pry shook his head.

"No. It's just gratitude. Your nerves have been all unstrung. You wait until tomorrow and see how you feel."

Her eyes blazed.

"You don't want my love, then!" she stormed, and flounced into her own room, slamming the door, bolting it.

Paul Pry grinned at the opportune display of temper, tiptoed to the communicating door and listened.

She was telephoning, talking in low, cautious tones to someone on the other end of the line. And that someone seemed in quite a temper, to judge from the cooing explanations, the drooling promise which the girl was making.

Paul Pry smiled, walked back to his own room, turned out the lights, pulled back the bed covers, took off his shoes, yawned, stretched.

In the other room Maude the Musher had finished her telephoning, and was listening, her ear to the door, her eyes gleaming with vengeful blood lust that made them almost luminous in the darkness.

She heard the creak of the bedsprings as a tired man flung himself upon them. A little later there came the sound of rhythmic snores. Maude the Musher smiled, a smile that was utterly inscrutable. Slowly, deliberately she began to remove her clothes. The communicating door was locked only from her side.

But it was not until nearly three o'clock in the morning that she slowly turned the knob and pushed the door back upon noiseless hinges. Softly she walked into the room.

The light which seeped through the window made of her silk sheer night garment a billowy aura which served to mist the outline of her form without concealing it. She slowly made her way toward the bed, her eyes on the bulged covers.

When she came closer she started to croon.

"Dearest, you risked your life for me. Please don't think me ungrateful. I would do anything for you, anything to get you what you deserve, you—"

And, having tiptoed to within springing distance, she drew a gleaming knife from behind her back, made a leap, and finished the sentence with a burst of foul profanity which accompanied the plunging knife.

For a long moment she straddled the hump in the bed, smothering it in an embrace of death, just as a midnight owl smothers the fugitive mouse with his enfolding wings.

Then the girl jumped back with an oath of surprise. She ripped away the bedcovers.

There was nothing beneath them but a wadded blanket or two and a pillow. The knife had ripped its way into the pillow, and white feathers were sifting over the bed, drifting through the air.

4

"Stop That Woman!"

Paul Pry sat in his apartment, his brows level in concentration. In his hand he held a typewritten copy of a notice which had evidently been prepared and delivered by the Gilvray gang. Pry had taken it from Chick Bender's wallet.

It related to the arrival of a messenger from a large corporation that had sold an entire bond issue of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars to a local banking concern.

The corporation, it seemed, having issued the bonds in small denominational amounts, having made each one negotiable upon the theory that the issue would find its way into the hands of the small investor, now found that a bank was willing to take the entire amount.

A special messenger, carrying the three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in negotiable bonds, was due to arrive at the Union Depot the next evening at precisely 6:13.

The typewritten instructions showed the utter thoroughness with which the organization of Big Front Gilvray functioned. Not only had all of the facts concerning the shipment of bonds been

ascertained, but the spies of the organization had even gone so far as to secure a picture of the messenger.

A copy of that picture was appended to the typewritten statement. It showed a youngish man with alert eyes, a small mouth, and hair that was slicked back in the polished symmetry of perfumed splendor.

But the typewritten statement confined itself to a description of the young man and the suitcase. It said nothing concerning a *modus operandi* by which the bonds were to be transferred from messenger to gangster.

And Paul Pry was particularly interested in that. For, as has been mentioned, Paul Pry, dapper, debonaire, very fast on his feet, lived entirely by his wits. His living was, strictly speaking, within the law, for he specialized upon the recovery of stolen property for a reward.

The grand total of those rewards during the past twelve months had run into a very pretty figure. And the fact that Big Front Gilvray had been the indirect means of collecting these rewards had caused Paul Pry to regard the "big shot" as the goose who laid his golden eggs, had caused Gilvray to regard Paul Pry as a young man who must be placed upon a hot spot.

So Paul Pry sat and studied the typewritten statement through the calm, still hours of the night. He had certain facts to work upon, and only certain facts.

Maude the Musher, with her penchant for underclothed rescues, was in town. Her man, Charley the Checker, was running the checking stand at the Union Depot. The purchase of that checking stand must have cost a pretty penny, and, in view of the discovery that a young man was bringing three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in negotiable bonds at 6:13 in the evening to the Union Depot, that purchase seemed significant.

Paul Pry smoked several cigarettes over the problem. At the end of that time he went to bed. The solution seemed just out of his mental reach, like a dangling Hallowe'en apple. It was hardly likely that a young man would check a suitcase with three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in bonds at a checking station. On the other hand, it was hardly possible that the gang of Big Front Gilvray would have become interested in that checking station unless it were to be more or less intimately associated with the suitcase containing the bonds.

In the end, Paul Pry drifted off to sleep, determined to play cards as they came to his hand without worrying too much in advance about what plans or what cards the other man might hold. Which is, after all, a pretty good way to gamble, or to live.

The 6:13 Cannonball Express rumbled into the Union Depot exactly on time to the minute. The exit lane for passengers was lined with those who came to meet incoming friends, relatives or sweethearts.

Paul Pry was ensconsed atop a girder where he was apparently inspecting a chipped place in the marble pillar. He wore white overalls, held a small trowel in his hand, and was utterly ignored by the stream of human traffic which milled beneath him.

The first of the passengers from the 6:13 began to arrive.

An athletic man, his face beaming in anticipation, strode through the gates, looked at the lined faces of those who waited in parallel rows. A young woman thrust her way out into the passageway. He uttered a choked exclamation, and they clinched each other tightly.

About them swirled other passengers. Groups were formed and swept about. Red-capped porters pushed carts loaded with stacked baggage.

Paul Pry kept his eyes upon the athletic-looking young man who had been the first up the exit lane. For the girl who had met him with such wild affection, who had brought that choked exclamation to his eager lips, was none other than Maude Ambrose, from Chicago, known as Maude the Musher.

She was attired in a fur coat which came a trifle below her knees, yet did not interfere with a vision of silken contours which stretched smoothly from ankle to knee.

They were within a few feet of the checking stand where the gangster known as Charley the Checker, a purple welt across his forehead, his eyes a little cloudy with the after-effects of a concussion, solicited travelers to deposit their suitcases.

Directly behind Charley the Checker, within three feet of the brass-topped counter along which suitcases were slid by those desiring to check them, was a shelf upon which some three dozen suitcases were stacked, side by side. They were each placed on end, their handles to the front, and pasteboard checks dangled from those handles.

Paul Pry noticed that there was one vacant space almost in the center of those suitcases. He watched and waited.

Two men were shaking hands profusely within a few inches of Maude the Musher and her new-found boy friend. A slender chap with cautious eyes and a cleft in his chin, pushed his way through the crowd. His right hand held the handle of a suitcase in a grip that was so tight the skin showed a dead white over the clenched knuckles.

Maude the Musher stepped back from the embrace of the young man. He made a playful grab at her, caught the sleeve of her fur coat. Maude the Musher jerked back.

The fur coat slid from her smoothly polished figure, and the crowded passengers and spectators became rooted to the spot.

There have been rumors of young women who, dressing hurriedly or carelessly for the street, have contented themselves with throwing a fur coat over filmy underthings, donning shoes and stockings and going demurely about their business.

But now the spectators had an opportunity to see for themselves that these rumors were not without their foundation.

Maude the Musher stood in such a position that the curves of her figure showed to the best advantage. The fur coat was on the tiled floor before her. Her pink silken undies were the latest mode, and had the most expensive ornamentation.

And, as though to direct all eyes to her, she screamed.

The traveling public have grown accustomed to colored photographs of beauties in underthings upon the advertising pages of the women's magazines. They have seen sights in Pullman cars, and, perhaps through hotel windows, that have made the colored photographs seem rather pale. But the sight of a woman in the flesh, clad as Maude the Musher was clad, was enough to root every one in his tracks for a swift instant.

Maude the Musher, after that scream, doubled forward and reached for the fur coat. A man sprang forward to assist her.

Someone was knocked scrambling in that mad rush, and that someone was the youth who was carrying the suitcase in so tight a grip.

In falling he seemed to hit his head. For he lay still, limp. Only Paul Pry's watching eyes had seen the hissing slungshot. All other eyes had been fastened upon Maude the Musher and the man who was springing to her assistance.

Only the eyes of Paul Pry, of all those spectators, saw exactly what happened to the suitcase which the young man had been carrying. For that suitcase was juggled with the well-trained coordination of a football squad sending the ball into an intricate play.

The suitcase was handed to one of the men who had been shaking hands. That man handed back a similiar suitcase, and that similar suitcase sprawled on the floor so that it skidded directly against the prostrate form of the young man.

The suitcase the young man had been carrying passed through the hands of two people and thudded upon the brass-covered counter of the checking stand. Charley the Checker moved with lightninglike rapidity. He flipped the suitcase into the vacant space on the shelf, turned his back and faded from sight.

After all, being a known gangster has its disadvantages, and Charley the Checker knew that for the police to recognize him as the man in charge of the checking station might be exceedingly embarrassing. But he could trust no other with the delicate problem of handling the stolen bag.

After the hue and cry should die away, those securities would find their way into financial channels through sources which were divers and devious, yet none the less available.

But, the theft accomplished without a hitch, Charley the Checker "ducked out" and his place was taken by a slender man with very pale skin, but with eyes that were as cold as those of a rattlesnake.

Maude the Musher grabbed her fur coat about her and ran. Someone laughed. A traveling man dropped his suitcase to clap his hands in applause, and half a dozen laughing males joined in the applause. A policeman grinned broadly and shouldered his way through the crowd.

"Keep movin'," he said, good-naturedly, and then saw the sprawled figure of the young man with the cleft chin. Two sympathetic passengers from the train were picking him up.

The officer thought with chain-lightning efficiency. He blew his whistle, raised his voice.

"Stop that woman!" he yelled.

And the crowd, sensing that all was not as it should have been with Maude the Musher, took up the cry. There was a car waiting

at the curb with motor running. The athletic young man unburdened by any baggage, gained this car, jumped behind the wheel. Obviously, it had been left there for that very purpose. Maude the Musher, her running handicapped somewhat by the neccessity of keeping the fur about her, was a stride or two later.

But she very wisely rid herself of her impedimenta by tossing the fur coat at the machine, and vaulted into the seat with a flash of well-formed limbs, a glimpse of rounded flesh.

The car was already in motion.

Police whistles shrilled. A traffic officer started tugging at his gun. The automobile violated the traffic rules, saw a hole in the oncoming lie of vehicles, and turned to the left with a great screeching of tires. The rushing land of automobiles closed up the opening, and the car was gone.

The young man with the cleft chin sat up. His eyes were completely glazed. It seemed impossible that he could know what he was doing, but he grasped for the suitcase on the floor beside him, snapped back the catch.

The suitcase was filled with those slips of tinted paper which represent waste cuttings from a printer's shop, and the young man with the cleft chin raised his voice in an agonized scream.

"I've been robbed!" he shouted. "My suitcase! Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars—"

His voice trailed off into a wail, and he slumped back, unconscious once more.

Men ran about aimlessly. The uniformed police threw a cordon about the depot. Near-by traffic officers left their posts. A hurry call brought a squad of reinforcements on the double-quick.

But the police were unable to apprehend the men responsible for the robbery. The young man with the cleft chin regained consciousness. He had remembered the spectacle of the young woman with the fur coat and the pink silk undergarments. Then someone had jostled him, there had been a terrific jar upon his head and he had dropped to the floor.

He had not even seen the faces of those who had been responsible. The blow with the slungshot had come from behind, and that which followed had been done with such well-trained efficiency as to baffle detection.

Paul Pry sat upon his post, listened to all that followed. From time to time, his eyes dropped to the check stand where the

pale-faced man took in suitcases and gave them out. And all the time the suitcase with its contents of bonds reposed back of the counter.

It was, as yet, too hot to handle. And what better hiding place could be divised for it than to have it nestled in amongst some two dozen other bags staring the police in the face?

5

Slick and Clean

Paul Pry fastened a bit of cement to the marble, repaired the chipped place, climbed down and took a street car. He didn't go far, however.

There were stores near the depot that specialized in needs for the traveler. Cheap suitcases, made up to imitate expensive baggage, were displayed in windows with temptingly low prices placarded upon them.

Paul Pry became a customer of one of these stores, and his purchases were most peculiar.

He negotiated for a suitcase, two alarm clocks, a set of dry batteries, some junk radio equipment which loomed imposingly as a mass of tangled, coiled wires, sockets, polished metal, yet which was worth virtually nothing.

The proprietor was rubbing his hands when Paul Pry left.

Paul Pry secured a taxicab, wound up the alarm clocks, placed them inside the suitcase together with his other purchases, set the alarms on the clocks with extreme care, and ordered the cab driver to take him to the Union Depot.

He arrived at a time when trains were leaving and pulling in, when night traffic to the city was just commencing.

There was a vehicle cordon of police about the place, but they were scrutinizing suitcases that went out rather than suitcases that came in, and Paul Pry called a red cap.

"Take this to the checking stand and get me a check on it," he said.

The porter moved off with the suitcase, and any noise which might have been made by the noisy ticking of the clocks was entirely drowned out in the tramp of feet, the roar of trains, the blare of automobile horns.

The porter returned with a slip of pasteboard bearing a number, received a generous tip, and promptly forgot about the entire matter. Paul Pry drove to his apartment, changed his clothes, ignored the pessimistic comments of Mugs Magoo, and returned to the Union Depot.

This time he carried a cane, rather a long, slender cane with a hook in the handle. He moved with the alert caution of a cat.

A glance showed him that the suitcase he desired was still in its place. That place was of advantage to the gangster who had flipped it there, because it required only a single sweeping motion with his right arm to transfer it there from the brass-covered counter.

Paul Pry took in the situation with calculating eye, and bided his time.

That time came when the evening trains had pulled out, when comparative silence descended upon the Union Depot. There were still hurrying throngs, but they were swallowed in the vast space of the huge terminal as though they had been but a handful of passing pedestrians.

Sounds became more audible.

Paul Pry looked at his watch, strolled to the curb, summoned a cab, had the driver wait for him.

"I'll be out in a few minutes. Got to meet the wife on one train and sprint across the city to make a connection at the other depot. She's bringing me my suitcase. Came away without it this afternoon. You be all ready to go as soon as I get here."

The cab driver nodded, yawned, pocketed a tip.

"I'll get you there," he promised.

Paul Pry strolled back to the station, went to the battery of

public telephone booths. Through the glass door of the booth he selected he could see the pasty-faced man on duty at the checking stand.

He was, doubtless, such a man as had no readily available police record. Yet he would hesitate to appeal to the police for protection in an emergency.

Paul Pry deposited a coin and gave the number of the telephone at the checking stand. He saw the pasty-faced man scoop up the telephone to his ear, answer it. Over the wire, to his ear, came the sound of a mechanical voice.

"Yeah, hello. This is the checkin' ag'ncy Un'n Depot."

Paul Pry let his voice rasp in raucous warning.

"I'm going to blow up the whole Union Depot," he said. "There's a blast going off in exactly three minutes. I want to wreck the building, but I don't want to kill you. I've nothing against you. What I'm fighting is Capitalism. You are just a working man."

The voice over the wire had lost its mechanical disinterest.

"What're you talkin' about?" it demanded.

And Paul Pry could see that the features of the pasty-faced man had become rigid with alarm

"I've got a bomb planted. It's in a suitcase I checked with you this afternoon. There are two alarm clocks in it. The first one will go off in five minutes. Then there will be an interval of five minutes and the second one will go off. When that second one goes off it'll set loose the explosion which will wreck . . ."

That was as far as he got, for the pasty-faced man had dropped the telephone and was sprinting for the back of the checking stand where long shelves furnished storage space for suitcases.

The first alarm had gone off, and the pasty-faced man was taking no chances.

Paul Pry darted from the booth, walked swiftly to the brass-covered counter, reached out with his cane. The hooked handle slid through the curved grip of the suitcase he wanted. A jerk, and it came from the shelf, went through the air and lit fairly upon the brass-covered counter.

The pasty-faced man was no coward. He had pulled down the suitcase Paul Pry had "planted" earlier in the evening, had cut loose the leatheroid side, and was pulling out the miscellaneous assortment of wires and clocks.

His back was, of necessity toward the counter during those few brief seconds while he worked.

Paul Pry took the suitcase, strolled casually toward the taxicab exit. The cabbie ran forward and grabbed the suitcase. Paul Pry stepped into the waiting cab and was whisked away.

Inspector Oakley twisted his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

"You've been collecting a lot of rewards lately," he said to Paul Pry.

That individual nodded cheerfully.

"After a fifty-fifty split with you, inspector."

Oakley studied the tip of his smoldering cigar.

"Well, I guess it's all right, only you're sure going to be on a hot spot one of these days. Gilvray's gunning for you— but that's no news to you. Do you know, Pry, I have a hunch that if you'd go before the grand jury and testify to some of the things you know about Gilvray and his methods, you could get an indictment that would stick."

Paul Pry smiled.

"And why should I do that, inspector?"

"It would bust up his gang, relieve you of the certain death that's hanging over your head."

Paul Pry laughed outright.

"And kill the goosie that lays such delightful golden eggs for me—for us! Oh, no, inspector. I couldn't think of it. By the way, inspector, I understand the corporation that lost the bonds has offered twenty thousand dollars for their return. Is that right?"

Oakley grunted.

"Yeah. They'll probably be stuck for the whole issue if they don't get 'em back, but they're so tight they only offer twenty thousand. Maybe there's a legal question about delivery. I don't know. I understand the lawyers are in a snarl over it. It seems that if the messenger who was robbed was a messenger of the bank that's buying the bonds there was a delivery and the bonds, being negotiable, can be cashed as against the company. If the messenger was in the employ of the company there wasn't any delivery, or some such thing. It's too fine spun for me."

Paul Pry extended a tapering hand, held his cigarette over the

ash tray, flipped off the ash with a little finger that gave just the right thrust to drop the ashes in a pile in the center of the tray.

"Suppose we split that reward fifty-fifty?"

Inspector Oakley's cigar sagged as his lower jaw dropped in surprise.

"You've got 'em?"

"Oh no. I wouldn't have them, but my underground intelligence department advises me that the suitcase containing them has been checked in a certain checking stand in one of the large department stores here in the city.

"I could advise you of the name of that store. I might even advise you of the number of the check. Then you could recover the bonds, announce that the police had 'acted upon a tip received from the underworld through the lips of a stool pigeon, swooped down and recovered the bonds, and the culprit had escaped.' Of course, you could take considerable credit—and ten thousand dollars in cold cash. That's rather a pretty addition to the pile of reward money you've been collecting.

"Naturally, I'd want my name kept out of it. It wouldn't do to have the bulk of the police force watching me with suspicion."

Inspector Oakley took a deep breath. His eyes glittered with avarice.

"This is something like! A nice clean job. I could pull that without having so damned many questions asked. Getting some of the swag you've tipped me off to has looked pretty raw and I've had to make a pay-off on some of my reward split; but this is slick and clean."

Paul Pry smiled.

"Yes, inspector, you're right. This is slick and clean. The location of the suitcase will be telephoned to you anonymously at precisely three minutes after midnight tonight. You can still make the morning papers with it."

"Why at three minutes after midnight?" asked Inspector Oakley.

"So that you can have a witness or two present to verify your statement that the information was telephoned in from an undercover man or a stool pigeon, as you may prefer to make the explanation."

Inspector Oakley shook hands.

* * *

Benjamin Franklin Gilvray occupied rather a pretentious dwelling in the more or less exclusive residential district. A well-kept lawn surrounded his house. The arch-gangster found that it was well to keep up a front, particularly during these troubled times when so many of his deals went sour.

He lay in his soft bed, covered by blankets of the most virgin wool, his pillow a mass of wrinkles where he had been tossing around and turning during the night. The morning sun was seeping in through the windows.

Big Front Gilvray had not slept well.

A hoarse combination of sound came from the front of the house. He waited for silence, tried to doze off again, but the sound was repeated.

He arose angrily, and flung up the curtain.

What the hell was the matter with the boys that they let things like this happen? They knew he wanted silence.

He looked out into the pale sunlight and saw a goose, tethered with a string to a peg driven in the lawn. The goose was strutting about with a neck crooked in suspicious uncertainty, a chest thrown well out, and a tail that wiggled from side to side with every web-footed stride.

To the neck of the goose was attached a metal band and from this band dangled a piece of paper.

Big Front Gilvray sounded the alarm.

Two choppers swung machine guns into place. The goose might or might not be a trap. He might carry an infernal machine for all they knew. The machine guns cut loose.

Bits of sod and dirt flew up from the lawn about the tethered goose. Then, as the guns centered, there was a burst of feathers, and the bird dropped into a limp heap.

Covered by one of the machine guns, a gangster sprinted out on the lawn, retrieved the dead bird, brought it into the house.

It was an ordinary goose. About its neck, attached to the metal band, was a bit of paper upon which was the message Big Front Gilvray had come to hate with a bitter hatred that transformed him from man to savage.

DEAR GOOSIE. THANKS FOR ANOTHER GOLDEN EGG.

The message was signed with two initials—P.P.

And the morning paper which reposed on the front porch of the big mansion carried screaming headlines announcing that Inspector Oakley would collect a twenty thousand dollar reward for the recovery of a third of a million dollars in negotiable bonds.

Big Front Gilvray, his anger transcending the bounds of sanity, grabbed the torn, bloody carcass of the bird and flung it across the room. It thudded to the wall with a splash of red, and a fluttering shower of feathers drifted through the room.

Big Front Gilvray tore the paper into small bits and stamped upon them. His gangsters looked at one another in consternation. The chief was usually so suavely certain of himself that to see him like this caused them to lose confidence and respect.

"Get that damned dude. Get him on the spot!" yelled Big Front Gilvray.

But Paul Pry, peacefully sleeping, assured that his bank account would be augmented by another ten thousand dollars, was beyond being troubled by the rumbled threats of the gangster.

As Inspector Oakley had so aptly remarked, the deal was "slick and clean."

Hell's Danger Signal

Against gangdom's slickest pair "Mugs" Magoo had warned him, yet deliberately Paul Pry had laid his plans. Did he have nine lives, nine charmed lives that he dared disregard all warning—dared overstep hell's danger signal unafraid?

1

Paul Pry noticed that the street seemed strangely deserted, and attributed the fact to a mere temporary lull in traffic.

He glanced at the opposite sidewalk where "Mugs" Magoo, ex–camera-eye man for the metropolitan police, was crouched against the wall of a bank building.

Mugs Magoo was waving his hand in a series of slow circles. That was the signal of danger—the danger sign that Paul Pry had instructed his lieutenant was to be used only in the event circumstances necessitated a hasty retreat.

It would, of course, have been the part of wisdom to have heeded that signal, for Mugs Magoo knew the underworld as perhaps no other living mortal. For years he had been on the force, merely tabulating crooks, filing their faces away in that card index memory of his. Then a political upheaval had lost him his job; an accident had lost him his right arm at the shoulder; and, he had become a drifter.

Right at present he was taking the part of a cripple, selling pencils. His hat, half filled with pencils, and with just a few coins

in the bottom, was balanced on the palm of his left hand. His face was covered with a two day's growth of grayish stubble, and his glassy eyes seemed utterly uninterested in life.

But, as a matter of fact, Mugs Magoo catalogued the underworld as it flowed past, on the side street that was to the gangster what Wall Street was to the financier. And Mugs' hand, making signals with the hat, checked off the gangsters as they passed and relayed the information to Paul Pry.

The danger signals increased in intensity.

But Paul Pry was curious. His eyes were diamond hard, and there was a taut alertness about his well-knit figure that showed he had seen and interpreted the signal. Otherwise he might have been merely a well-dressed lounger, idling away the late evening on the city's streets.

A big car rolled around the corner, purred smoothly to the curb, on the same side as that occupied by Paul Pry. The door opened, and a woman stepped to the pavement.

Paul Pry made his living by his wits. He loved excitement, and he had no mental perspective when it came to courting danger. Lately he had made his money, and a very great deal of money, through the simple process of shaking down gangsters, matching his wits against their brute force.

And Paul Pry had learned from bitter experience that gangsters are very resentful indeed, and wont to show their resentment with pellets which are belched from a machine gun. He had also learned that beautiful women are, by very virtue of their beauty, likely to prove exceedingly false and dangerous.

But none of those facts dimmed in the least Paul Pry's appreciation of beauty. Nor did the danger curb his unique activities. So far, his agile wits had always kept him at least one jump ahead of those gangsters who wanted to remove him from the trials and tribulations of an unkind, but very interesting world.

This woman was particularly beautiful. But her beauty had a suggestion of smooth hardness about it, like the polished surface of a diamond. She was clad in evening gown and a white fur coat that should have made her seem like a pure snowflake. In reality, she resembled an icicle, glitteringly hard and utterly cold, despite the beautiful figure, the graceful curve of the chin, and the profile

which might have been chiseled from the finest marble by the most skilled artist.

Paul Pry let his eyes slither over to the shadows across the street where Mugs Magoo crouched in watchful waiting.

Mugs had ceased to move his hat. The danger sign was discontinued. Either the danger had passed, or else it was too late for a warning to do any good.

The woman stared at Paul Pry, and there was nothing of virginal innocence in that stare. On the other hand, it was not the stare of one who wishes to make an acquaintance. It was merely that she wished to look at Paul Pry for reasons of her own, and she looked at him without seeking to disguise the fact.

The woman was hardly the type to drive an automobile. Her expensive clothes, the pride of her bearing, created an impression of surroundings that should have included a liveried chauffeur, a big limousine, an expensive apartment.

Yet she had been the one who had piloted the car, and the car was not a limousine. It was big and powerful, but was an open touring car with side curtains, partially concealing the back.

The woman's eyes glittered over the face of Paul Pry. Then she relaxed. A certain tension which had held her rigid seemed to have dissolved. The look of hardness vanished from her face. She became a creature of softly seductive curves, of ravishing beauty, and she moved toward the door which was at the rear of the touring car with the grace of a professional dancer crossing the stage.

Her arm shot out. The gloved hand opened the door. The interior of the car seemed empty.

"O.K., Bill," she said.

The plush robe on the floor of the car stirred into life. A casual observer would, perhaps, have expected some huge dog to answer the call and emerge from beneath the lap robe.

But it was no dog that shook off the folds of the robe and came out into the tang of the night air.

It was a man.

The man wore evening clothes. Someone had smashed a terrific blow on his nose; the eyes were swollen; the front of the starched shirt and the waistcoat showed plainly the stains of crimson which had spouted from the nose.

The coat was ripped. A pocket had been literally torn out, and was dangling from the threads which bound the bottom of the pocket to the coat. One of the silk lapels was ripped half away. There was no hat. The hair was matted, and the swollen nose made breathing through the mouth a necessity.

He was undignified as he crawled out of the shelter of the robe, staggered to the pavement. The woman extended a solicitous hand to his arm.

What followed came with that overlapping swiftness of events which is as impossible to follow in detail as the well-organized offensive of a well-drilled football team, sweeping down the field in a bewildering change of positions, executed at top speed.

Doorways opened, and men came out of the darkness, running low. The street lights glinted from the steel weapons. Yet no shots were fired.

One of the men swung a swift arm, and the blackjack "kerthunked" on the matted hair of the individual who had already seen such rough usage.

Another man jumped behind him, was ready to receive the unconscious form as it slumped backward and down.

Another swung a vicious blackjack at the woman's head. She, too, would have been unconscious but for one thing, and that one thing was Paul Pry.

Paul Pry carried a cane, which, to the casual eye, was merely a polished bit of wood. Only the trained observer would have noticed that that which seemed to be wood was not wood at all, but steel painted to resemble polished wood. That steel was very thin, and furnished the sheath for a tempered blade of finest steel which was attached to the handle of the cane.

It was, in the hands of a trained fencer, a highly efficient weapon, and Paul Pry was adept in its use. His right hand jerked out the naked steel of the blade.

The lights glinted from it as it darted forward, as smoothly rapid as the tongue of a snake. The man who was swinging the blackjack at the woman's skull jumped back with a scream. The cold steel had flicked out and bit deep into the shoulder muscles. The swinging arm was deflected, and the blackjack whizzed down in a harmless swing.

A car came around the corner, driven in second gear, the

tortured tires shrieking their protest as they skidded over the pavement. Two men turned with oaths to Paul Pry.

But there were no shots fired. For some reason, the assailants seemed to require absolute silence so far as their operations were concerned. It was an affair of steel and blackjacks. The glittering knives swept in wicked thrusts, and the men swung their blackjacks. But Paul Pry, standing with his left arm thrown about the woman, holding her closely to him, swung his blade in a flickering arc of deadly speed.

The steel flecked in and out forming a barrier of perfect defense, biting once in a while into the bodies of the attackers.

The woman swung. Her right hand came out from beneath the fur of the coat. There was a pearl handled, nickeled automatic smuggled in the palm.

"I'll shoot, you rats!" she blazed.

The defense was too strong. The attackers jumped back. There was a muffled command.

"He's in the car," said someone.

"O.K., boys," rasped a voice. "Leave the—"

And the epithet which he used to describe the woman was one which was usually reserved for masculine ears.

The woman broke away from Paul Pry's grasp.

"Give him back! Give him back!" she screamed.

But the figures, still moving with well-disciplined efficiency of motion, had jumped into the purring automobile which had dashed to the curb. Doors slammed. The woman's gun blazed.

The shot might have been a signal. It finished the deadly silence of the attack.

The car was ripping into grinding motion. The back wheels half spun as the power was kicked into the drive. The car seemed to jump forward, half stop, jump again.

And there were little pin pricks of fire which leaped from the darkness of that car. The street echoed to the rattle of bullets. Paul Pry felt one whip past his cheek, felt something jerk the hat from his head, heard the rattle of a leaden hail against the side of the building behind him. Then the car was away, and the firing ceased.

The woman's face was deathly white. Her crimsoned lips were wide as she stared with bulging eyes at the departing car. And then her mouth spewed curses.

Paul Pry touched her arm. "The police," he suggested.

The words affected her as would an electric shock. She jumped forward, toward the car she had driven up. One arm flung up the coat, the skirt, disclosing her shapely legs, the other pitched the weapon she had held into the back of the car, pulled open the door catch.

She raised her legs over the gear shift, slammed the feet down on the brake and clutch pedals, and she did it all with a swift efficiency, a lack of lost motion, which indicated perfect muscular coordination.

Her manner was that of one who is accustomed to swift decisions and rapid execution of those decisions. And Paul Pry, curious, sensing an opportunity to exercise his unusual talents, moving with an efficiency every whit as swiftly purposeful as that of the young woman, leaped into the seat beside her and slammed the door.

The gears were meshing by the time the door catch banged into place. Paul Pry turned his head toward the opposite side of the street as the car lurched into motion.

Mugs Magoo was crouched as he had been before the swift battle. His hat was moving in a series of circles. The danger sign. And then the car, swinging for the corner, lost Mugs Magoo from Paul Pry's vision.

2

The woman sent the car into hurtling speed, quested the side street, prowled about the main boulevard, and finally was forced to face the facts. She had lost the car ahead.

She slowed, turned a drawn, haggard face to Paul Pry. "He's gone!" she said.

Her voice held a note of despair, an utter hopelessness which indicated that something of the utmost importance had gone from her life.

Paul Pry nodded, his ears attuned to the throbbing of a police siren which was growing in intensity with a rapidity which betokened high speed on the part of the police car.

"I don't know how you feel about the police," he said. "But, as far as I'm concerned—"

And his shoulders shrugged expressively as he jerked his head over his shoulder in the direction of the shrieking siren which was now drawing uncomfortably close.

The woman acted as though she had heard that siren for the first time, and her reactions were characteristically swift. She

floorboarded the throttle, and the car leaped forward like a startled deer.

Paul Pry noticed that she was an expert driver as the car swung into the side street, tilted, skidded, straightened as the whirling rubber bit into the pavement, and then they went places in a hurry.

By the time the woman took her foot off the throttle for a moment, and pressed hard on the brake as a bit of traffic loomed ahead, the sound of the siren had become inaudible to Paul Pry's ears. The police car had probably gone first to the scene of the shooting.

Paul Pry grinned at the girl as the traffic signal straightened out enough to give a way through, and the young woman sent the car through that hole in the traffic like a skimming trout, snaking through an opening in some submerged logs to head for the shady shelter under an overhanging bank.

"Can I be of any assistance?" he asked.

She shook her head, and, unlike many drivers of her sex, did not turn her head as she addressed him, but kept her eyes glued to the road.

"I guess not. But you can come with me while I pour a jolt of gin into my system. God knows I need it!"

Paul Pry settled back on the cushions.

"O.K. by me," he murmured.

The car made several corners. The woman started glancing about her, swung the car in a figure eight around a space of four blocks, making certain that no one was following. Then she slammed on the brakes, switched off the lights, twisted the steering wheel, and sent the car slamming up a private driveway, midway in the block. The open doors of a narrow garage yawned ahead. The woman sent the car through those doors, skidded the tires on the floor of the garage just when it seemed she would crash out the rear end of the structure, and jumped to the floor, heedless of the expensive fur coat which flapped against greasy objects, scraped dusty wheel hubs.

She was tugging at the door of the garage, getting it closed, and she apparently had no idea that Paul Pry would help her. Evidently she had been trained in self-sufficiency and did not expect those little masculine courtesies which are so priceless to most women of youth, beauty and expensive clothes.

Paul Pry gave her a hand. The door slammed into place, and a spring lock clicked.

"We go out the other way," said the woman.

She crossed the garage, groped for a door, opened it, and stood for a moment outlined against the illumination of a courtyard, listening, peering.

Then she nodded, beckoned, and stepped out upon the cement. There was a flight of stairs, a door.

Paul Pry followed her through that door and found himself in the carpeted corridor of an apartment house. They went up a flight of stairs to a second corridor, then up another flight to the third floor. The stairs were broad and carpeted with a thickness of cushioned cloth which made them absolutely silent. The illumination was not too brilliant.

The front of the apartment showed at the end of the corridor, opening upon another street, well lit. The woman's room was at the back, near those broad, well-carpeted stairs.

She paused, fitted a latchkey to the lock, then stepped back. Her keys clinked in the pocket of the coat. The right hand was concealed beneath the glistening fur of the garment. She turned the knob with her left hand, flung open the door, waited a moment, then switched on the light.

Paul Pry noticed that she had retrieved the gun from the back seat of her car, and he had no doubt as to what her right hand held beneath the concealment of the fur coat. But the woman made no effort to draw back out of the line of possible fire, or to have Paul Pry enter the apartment first. She was self-reliant, and she had been trained in the hard school of life that teaches its pupils to take things as they come.

The lights showed an apartment, well furnished, luxurious. The soft lighting glowed invitingly upon deep chairs, upon massive tables, soft couches and rich tapestries. There was an odor of stale incense in the air, and the ash trays which were on the table were filled with cigarette ashes and cigarette butts. Aside from that, the place was an example of neat housekeeping.

She walked, cat-footed, into the apartment.

"Close the door," she said to Paul Pry, flinging the words over her shoulder without turning her head, and walking toward a door which evidently opened into a bedroom.

Here she did the same thing she had done at the door of the apartment—flinging open the door with her left hand, the right still being concealed beneath the fur coat. The bedroom was not as neat as the parlor had been. Paul Pry caught glimpses of sheer silks strewn over the bed, pink fluffy garments that were on chairs.

The woman entered the room, pulled open the door of the closet, looked in it, looked under the bed. Then she walked out, went to the kitchen, kicked open the swinging door and stepped into the room. She clicked on the light switch and thrust the gun which her right hand had held, into some receptacle which had been tailored for it in the front of her dress, well out of sight. Then she sighed—turned to Paul Pry.

"Open the ice box and get some ice and a lemon. I've got some gin, and I'll get some glasses. I'm all in. How do you feel?"

"Jake a million," said Paul Pry.

She nodded casually.

"You would," she said, and took some glasses from the little cupboard over the sink, sat them on the tiled drain board. Paul Pry opened the ice box, took out a tray of ice. He noticed that the ice box was filled with bottled goods, but that there was no trace of food in it. Evidently this woman was not strong on cooking.

The drink was mixed. They clinked glasses.

"I haven't thanked you for stopping that swing that was headed for my head—not yet," she said.

Paul Pry touched his lips to the glass.

"Don't mention it," he said.

She drained her drink in three throaty gulps, tilting back her neck, drinking with a frankness that discounted all ladylike sips of the beverage, in favor of getting it down where it would do the most good.

She sighed and reached for the bottle.

"Don't be polite," she said. "I'll be one up on you in a minute."

She fixed herself a second drink. Paul Pry's glass was still half-filled as she inclined her glass to touch the brim of his for the second time.

"Here's how," she said.

She disposed of this drink more slowly.

"Well," she observed, "let's have another one and go into the other room, and have a cigarette with it."

Paul Pry held the bottom of his glass up and drained the last of the drink.

"O.K.," he observed.

She mixed the third, and then led the way into the living room. dropped in a chair. Her fur coat was open, hanging down on either side. She propped her feet up on a vacant chair.

"Happy days," said Paul Pry.

"Here's mud in your eye. Got a match?"

Paul Pry lit her cigarette, stared pensively for a moment, and sighed again.

"I love my friends, and hate my enemies," she said.

"Meaning?" asked Paul Pry.

She turned glitteringly dangerous eyes on him.

"Meaning that I hate a sniveling hypocrite," she said, "and meaning that you're a total stranger to me."

"I don't get the connection," said Paul Pry.

Her cheeks had color now, and the eyes held a moist glitter which came from the alcohol of the first two drinks.

"Meaning that if anything happened and I had to choose between a friend and a total stranger, I'd stick by the friend!" she snapped.

Paul Pry nodded. "You can't be blamed for that."

"Don't blame me, then."

"I'm not."

"Maybe you will."

"Perhaps."

There was silence for a moment.

"But," said Paul Pry, his eyes lazily regarding the smoke which curled upward from his cigarette, "it must be quite a privilege to be a friend of yours."

"It is," she agreed. There was a dreamy, reminiscent light in her eyes, as she added softly, after a moment, "And how!"

Paul Pry grinned.

"And highly inconvenient to be an enemy of yours."

The lips straightened.

"You said something!" she replied, and her words were as close clipped as bullets.

"How does one get to be your friend? Would saving your life do the trick?"

She regarded him with sober, appraising eyes.

"Well—" she hesitated.

"Well what?"

"I'm not ungrateful," she said, slowly, "but I'm just telling you, no matter what happens, a total stranger don't stack with an old friend. You remember that, no matter what else comes up between us, and then I won't feel like a damned hypocrite if I should have to sacrifice you for a friend."

Paul Pry laughed lightly.

"Baby," he said, "I like your style."

The remark added nothing to the color of her cheeks or to the warmth of her eyes.

"Most men do," she agreed.

"Now," said Paul Pry, "tell me what it was all about."

She drew a deep breath, drained off the last of the drink in the glass, and muttered something that might have been a single explosive epithet.

"You would have to ask that," she observed, and it was as though she had picked up a switch to punish a friendly dog for some infraction of discipline, so far as her manner and tone were concerned.

Paul Pry's own eyes became just a trifle diamond hard but they remained appreciative.

"The man that was with me," she said, slowly, "was my brother."

Paul Pry nodded, and there was approval in his nod.

"I thought he would be," he said tonelessly.

The young woman snapped him a suddenly questing look, but Paul Pry's face was a mask.

"Yes," she said, "an only brother."

"What did they want him for?"

"God knows. They tried to grab him off earlier in the evening. They smashed his nose. There was a doctor where we stopped the car. He was a friend of ours. They evidently figured we'd be coming there for medical attention, and they got there first and stuck around in the shadows, waiting for us to show up.

"I rather had a hunch there might be some trouble there, which

is why I got out and looked things over. I spose you noticed me giving you the once-over."

Paul Pry nodded.

"And what will they do with him? Take him for a ride?"

She winced at that, kicked her feet down from the chair without answering the question. She went to the door of the kitchen.

"I'm going to have another drink."

"Count me out," said Paul Pry.

She stared moodily at him, regarding the hand that held the smoking cigarette between the fingers, noticing the steady wisps of smoke which went spiraling upward. There was no sign of tremor in the hand.

"You sure got nerves!" she said, and there was genuine admiration in her tone. "I wish," she went on, "that you wasn't—"

"Wasn't what?" asked Paul Pry.

"A total stranger," she said.

"Oh, well, it's not a permanent relationship," he observed.

She nodded gloomily.

"I've just got a hunch," she said, and stopped to regard him with pursed lips and meditative eyes. "Did you see the faces of any of those men?"

Paul Pry saw no particular reason for being truthful.

"No," he observed. "As one total stranger to another, I can tell you that I did not. I was too excited."

She laughed, a harsh, bitter laugh.

"You've been places!" she said. And then she added an after-thought. "Let's hope you don't have things done to you," she observed, and went into the kitchen to mix the other drink.

3

There sounded a whirring of an electric door device. The girl came out of the kitchen in two swift strides. Her skin matched her fur coat in color. Her right hand was once more beneath the folds of the garment.

"Got a gun?" she asked of Paul Pry, and her tone while taut with emotion, was as casual as when she had asked him if he had a match.

"I could find one if I had to," said Paul Pry.

"You may have to," she said and strode to the door.

She flung it open.

"I'll take it standing up, whatever it is," she said, before she had seen what was in the corridor.

A young boy came forward. He was in the uniform of a messenger service, and he held forward an addressed envelope.

"Miss Lola Beeker?" he asked.

The girl extended her left hand.

"You guessed it, sonny."

His eyes took in her beauty with that breathless reverence

which immaturity has for a beautiful woman, when eyes are just awakening to grace of form and face, and experience has not learned to tell that beauty of figure is, after all, but beauty of figure.

"Gee!" he said, and handed her the envelope, his wide eyes still on her face. "You don't need to give me no tip, lady. It's a pleasure!"

She ignored the breathless appreciation of her beauty with a disregard which showed she accepted such homage as a matter of course. She rewarded the boy with a smile and a pat of the hand. Paul Pry's eyes noticed the mechanical nature of the smile, the casual carelessness of the pat. The boy noticed neither.

He was still standing, wide-eyed, when the girl gently closed the door and ripped the edge off of the envelope with a hand that trembled.

She pulled out a folded bit of paper and read a typewritten message. Her eyes were brilliant and hard. Her breast rose and fell with the strain of her heavy breathing.

She folded the letter, replaced it in the envelope. She looked at Paul Pry with eyes that seemed unseeing, and walked into the bedroom.

After a few moments, Paul Pry heard her voice.

"I'm getting on some more comfortable things. Open that door, will you? The boy's waiting for an answer. Tell him the lady says yes."

Paul Pry approached the door. This time he opened it with his left hand, and his right hand was hovering around the lapels of his coat.

As had been so aptly observed by the lady herself, he was a total stranger.

The boy in uniform was waiting, standing just as he had been when the door closed. His eyes showed a stab of disappointment as they focused on Paul Pry.

"The lady," said Paul Pry, "says yes."

The boy nodded, still stood, staring.

"Gee, mister," he blurted, "you ain't her husband, are you?"

"No," said Paul Pry, "I'm a total stranger, and I'm going in just a minute or two."

The boy grinned.

"Good night, mister."

"Good night," said Paul Pry, and was careful to shoot the bolt on the lock when he had closed the door.

The woman came out of the bedroom dressed in a filmy negligee.

"This," she said, "feels more comfortable."

"It looks like a million dollars," said Paul Pry.

"You gave the boy the message?"

"Yes."

She nodded.

"That was all, wasn't it?" asked Paul Pry. "Just that the lady said yes?"

Her eyes were starry.

"Ain't that enough?"

Paul Pry turned toward his glass.

"On second thought," he remarked irrelevantly, "I think I'll have another drink myself. Can I mix you one?"

And he started toward the kitchen picking up the two glasses as he went.

"No!" she snapped, and the starry gleam had gone from her eyes, leaving them as coldly observant as were the eyes of Paul Pry.

Paul Pry mixed up the drink, taking care to make far more soda water in its content than gin, and returned to the room, the ice clinking in the glass.

The woman had flung herself on the sofa. The negligee had fallen back from her raised bare arm which held a cigarette in a long jade and ivory holder. She was staring at Paul Pry.

"That message," she said, "was from a widowed sister. Her child's sick, and she wants me to come out and stay with her tonight. I hate the thought of nursing a sick child."

"And of telling her of the brother who was taken for a ride?" he asked.

"I shan't tell her!" snapped the figure on the couch.

"I see," he muttered, noncommittally.

"You would," she flared.

Paul Pry shot her a swifter glance. The face was as fierce as that of a tigress, and it softened instantly into a smile of invitation.

"But I want to thank you—properly, when I have the opportunity, for saving my life. When can I see you?"

"Any time."

"Well. I've had a minute of relaxation, and that's enough. I'll pack my suitcase, and get started. Tell you what—you got any friends in the city?"

The tone was anxious.

"Not a friend," said Paul Pry.

Paul Pry hesitated for an appreciable fraction of a second.

A swift smile darted about her lips.

"Oh, I know," she said. "You don't need to explain. Listen, maybe you can do something else for me. Go to the Billington Hotel and register under the name of George Inman, will you. You don't need to stay there, just take a room so you'll be registered, and so you can get mail there. If you'll do that, I'll drop you a note as soon as the child gets well."

"O.K.," said Paul Pry, his face lightening. "That'll be a swell idea. George Inman, eh?"

"George Inman," she said.

The woman kicked off the folds of the negligee, and the result was rather startling.

"And get out of here, so I can get into some street clothes. I'll drop you a note."

Paul Pry finished his drink, reached for the door knob.

"I'll be seeing you," she said.

"Toodle-loo," remarked Paul Pry after the manner of a male who has been utterly hypnotized.

"Cheerio," she cooed as the door closed.

Paul Pry, in the corridor, became swiftly cautious. He didn't go down the back stairs, the way he had come, but went to the front of the building, found an automatic elevator, entered the cage and pressed the button which took him to the lobby. He walked out, past a desk where a colored lad in a brilliant uniform sat at a telephone switchboard, and out onto the lighted street.

He walked a few steps, retraced his steps and looked at the index over the mail boxes.

The woman's name was the same as that on the letter. Lola Beeker.

Paul Pry called a cab.

The address that he gave was within half a block from the place

he had been standing when the woman had debouched from the car, a vision in white.

He discharged the cab, paid the meter, and stubbed his toe as he turned back to the sidewalk. He tried to get up, but sank back with a groan. The cab driver, suddenly solicitous, jumped from the cab, came toward him.

"What is it, boss?"

"I don't know," said Paul Pry. "Something happened in my leg, a nerve or something. I can't move it."

The taxi driver straightened, peered up and down the side street.

"There's a doctor over there, about seventy-five feet or so. Think you can make it?"

Paul Pry groaned, nodded.

"I'll try," he said.

A passerby, attracted by the sprawled figure, came cautiously over. The cab driver explained. Between them, they got Paul Pry to his feet and took him along the pavement to the flat where a sign announced that Philip G. Manwright, M.D., held office hours from two to five in the afternoon on every day except Sunday.

The cab driver pressed the bell.

After some two or three tries, there sounded motion from within the house, and feet thudded along the corridor which led to the door. A light clicked on, and a man in bathrobe with hair that was mussed up and eyes that were slightly swollen with sleep, regarded them in dour appraisal.

"Doctor?" asked the cab driver.

The man nodded.

"This guy did a Brode an' busted a leg or somethin' right out in front of the joint," said the driver.

"Come in," invited Doctor Manwright.

They shuffled along the corridor, into a surgical room where an operating table occupied the center of the floor under a droplight.

"Put him down there," said the doctor.

They stretched Paul Pry out on the table.

"Which leg?" asked the doctor.

"Right."

He passed exploring fingers over it.

"Something seemed to happen and all the strength went out of it. It's pricking like pins and needles now," said Paul Pry.

The doctor frowned, flexed the leg.

"Humph."

The cab driver grinned cheerfully at Paul Pry.

"Well," he said, "I'll run along."

"Better drive the cab up and wait," said Paul Pry.

"O.K., boss."

The two men ambled awkwardly out of the room. The doctor drew the bathrobe about him and regarded Paul Pry speculatively.

"Any peculiar feeling about the heart?" he asked.

"None," said Paul Pry.

"Notice any sudden pain just above the leg when it gave out?"

"None."

"Nervous?"

"Very. I can't sleep. I got all sorts of strange symptoms."

The doctor felt the leg again.

"I'll go get some clothes on," he announced, "and we'll give you a once-over."

"Sorry to bother you," said Paul Pry. "I'm feeling better now. The circulation seems to be coming back."

"In any pain?" asked the doctor.

"Just the pins and needles."

The doctor crossed to a cabinet, took out a bottle, poured a few drops into a glass of water.

"Drink this," he said. "I'll dress and come in again. I won't be three minutes."

"O.K.," said Paul Pry and sipped at the glass.

The doctor left the room.

Paul Pry got up and dumped the mixture down the sink, crossed on swift, silent feet into the office which was next to the surgical room, and stared at the flat-topped desk, the bookcase, the card index of files.

He opened the files. The light which came from the surgical room enabled him to pick out the letters of the index. He consulted the "B's" and pulled out a card marked "Beeker, Laura."

Then Paul Pry noticed a day book on the desk. He opened it and consulted the current date. It appeared that, between eleven

and twelve, Doctor Manwright had treated a gentleman who gave the name of Frank Jamison.

Paul Pry went to the card index, and pocketed the card of Frank Jamison. Then he went back to the surgical room and stretched out on the operating table, closing his eyes and breathing regularly.

The doctor came into the room within a few minutes, looking gravely professional. The depression had undoubtedly hit the medical business, and Paul Pry felt certain that the doctor would at least lay a foundation for a stiff charge for a night visit.

Nor was he wrong. For twenty minutes the doctor examined him. At the end of that time, there was doubt and a certain suspicion in the doctor's eyes.

"You'd better come back tomorrow afternoon. What's the name?"

"George Inman."

"Where do you live?"

"Billington Hotel."

"Age?"

"Twenty-six."

"Ever had any heart trouble, dizzy spells, rheumatism?"

Paul Pry nodded gloomily.

"I feel dizzy every once in a while," he said, "and I used to have rheumatism in my right shoulder."

The doctor sucked in a yawn.

He pulled a card from a drawer, filled it out, yawned again.

"Come tomorrow afternoon at any time between two and four. The charge for this visit is—twenty dollars."

Paul Pry produced his wallet, took out the bills, peeled off a twenty. The doctor glimpsed a couple of the hundreds and one that seemed even larger in denomination. He ceased to yawn.

"I may want to put you in a hospital for observation," he said. "It's a baffling case."

"Nothing serious?" asked Paul Pry.

"I can't tell—yet."

Paul Pry tested the leg.

"Feel all right?"

"Yes, sorta numb, but all right. I can walk."

"Go to your hotel and go to bed," said Doctor Manwright.

Paul Pry hobbled to the door. The cab driver was waiting to assist him to the cab.

"Billington Hotel," said Paul Pry.

"O.K.," said the driver.

The doctor bowed, said good morning, and closed the door. Paul Pry hobbled into the cab.

4

At the Billington Hotel Paul Pry registered as George Inman and was given a room.

"There's a telephone call for you," said the clerk. "The party seemed very anxious to have you call as soon as you came in."

He handed Paul Pry a number.

"O.K.," said Paul Pry.

He went to his room, tipped the bell boy, pocketed the key and went out.

"Did you call the number?" asked the clerk.

"I called it," said Paul Pry.

The clerk nodded, snapped the lock on the safe, yawned.

Paul Pry boarded a cruising cab. The address which he gave was within a block of the place where the girl had driven him into the private driveway which terminated in the mysterious garage at the rear of the apartment house of such unconventional design.

Paul Pry told the cab to wait, walked the block, climbed a fence, and found himself in the cemented courtyard in the rear of

the apartment house. He opened the back door, climbed the carpeted stairs.

He paused at the door of the girl's apartment long enough to go through the formality of pressing the button of the door signal. As he had expected, there was no answer, no sign of life from within.

Paul Pry produced a flat leather receptacle which contained some two dozen keys, chosen for general efficiency. He opened the door with the third key, boldly switched on the light and walked in.

He closed and bolted the door, lit a cigarette, hummed a little tune, and walked into the bedroom.

The young woman had left her evening clothes, crumpled into a careless wad, and thrown on the bed. She had evidently donned a plain street suit which would be inconspicuous. The white fur coat was hanging in the closet.

Paul Pry looked on the top of the dresser, frowned, prowled about the drawers, paused to consider, and then went to the closet and put his hand in the pocket of the fur coat. His face lit with a smile of satisfaction as his questing fingers closed on a folded sheet of paper. He pulled it out.

It was the typewritten note that the woman had taken from the messenger boy.

Paul Pry read it.

> All right, Lola, we've got Bill Sacanoni. He goes for a ride unless we get what we want and get it in a hurry. First, we want ten grand stuck in a bag and delivered at the place we told you. Second, we want George Inman put on the spot. You've stuck up for him and shielded him long enough. We know all about him. You've got until daylight to do your stuff. Then Bill gets his. We know you can get the coin, but we want to be sure about Inman.

The note was unsigned.

Paul Pry thrust it in his pocket, paused, halfway to the door, then returned and put it back in the pocket of the fur coat. He clicked off the lights, opened the door and slipped out into the corridor.

He walked to the cab, and told the driver to take him to a

certain street corner near the wholesale district. That corner was near the spot where Paul Pry maintained a secret apartment, a place where he could live and be reasonably safe from danger while he formulated his plans, rested between coups.

He discharged the cab, made certain that he was not followed, and entered the apartment. Mugs Magoo blinked glassy eyes at him.

"You still here?"

"Sure. Where'd you think I was going?"

"To keep an appointment with the undertaker."

"Not yet."

Mugs Magoo grunted, reached for the bottle of whiskey that was at his elbow.

"Not yet, but soon."

Paul Pry ignored the comment, took off his hat and light coat, sat down in a chair, and lit a cigarette.

"Why the danger signal, Mugs?"

Mugs Magoo snorted.

"Because the place was lousy with guns. I spotted 'em from across the street. They were in the shadows behind you. They weren't waiting for you, or you'd have been dead long before you got the signal. But I figured there was going to be some guns popping, and the innocent bystander usually makes the biggest target. Then again, being a witness to a gang killing ain't so nice from the standpoint of life insurance risks."

Paul Pry nodded. His voice, when he spoke, was almost dreamy.

"The girl, Mugs?"

"That was Lola Beeker. She's in with a big bottle, name of Bill Sacanoni. I think that was him that crawled outa the car an' got beat up."

Paul Pry nodded.

"Why didn't they use guns, Mugs?"

"Wanted to avoid the bulls for one thing, and wanted to muscle Bill away. They'll hold him for something. The guns had the street cleared. They started turning pedestrians away right after you slipped through. There's a gangster's doctor in the block, and I guess they was spottin' his office."

Paul Pry reached in his inside pocket and took out the cards he had purloined from the files of the gangsters' physician.

He looked at the card of Lola Beeker.

It gave her name, age, address, list of symptoms that had to do with a minor nervous complaint. The card bore a notation that Bill Sacanoni would pay the bill. The card also gave the address of Bill Sacanoni.

Paul Pry turned it under, and looked at the card of the man who had been treated that evening, between the hours of eleven and twelve.

The name was Frank Jamison. The address was in an apartment hotel well toward the upper end of town. The card gave lists of various treatments. Once the treatment was for alcoholism. Once the treatment was for gunshot wounds, and the last treatment was for a stabbing wound in the shoulder.

Paul Pry nodded.

That would be the man who had swung the blackjack at the girl, the one who had felt the bite of Paul Pry's sword cane as it jabbed home.

"Who is Frank Jamison, Mugs?"

Mugs Magoo regarded the empty whiskey glass with judicial solemnity, reached for the bottle, and knitted his brows.

"Don't place the moniker. Maybe it's phony. Know what he looks like?"

"Five feet nine, one hundred and seventy or about that. Has a funny pointed jaw, like a battleship's bow –"

Mugs Magoo interrupted. "That places him," he said, "and I remember now he used to use the name o' Jamison. It's his middle name. Frank Jamison Kling is the full name. He's a big shot. They say he makes a specialty of musclin' people into big ransoms."

"Is he," asked Paul Pry, "likely to be the head of his gang?"

"Sure. If he was in that scuffle about the car, he's the man that was running the show."

"And likely to be the one who gets the money when it's over?"

"Sure to," grunted Mugs.

"How about George Inman?" asked Paul Pry.

Mugs Magoo lowered the whiskey glass. Surprise showed in the glassy eyes that were usually so utterly devoid of expression.

"Guy," he said, "don't tell me you're monkeyin' with that bird!"

"Why?" asked Paul Pry.

Mugs Magoo heaved a deep sigh.

"I gotta hand it to you. It's a gift, gettin' into deep water every time you start wadin'. You don't ever pick no ordinary dangers. When you start gettin' into trouble, you wade right in over your necktie.

"That bird Inman, now— Well, there's talk going around about that baby. He's one of the upper crust of gangsters, and he's playing both ends against the middle. Of course, George Inman ain't nothing but a name. It's the name this big shot uses when he's slipping over a fast one.

"He works under cover all the time, and nobody's ever been able to get a line on him. They know the name, and that's all. It's a cinch he's one of the biggest shots in town. That much they know because they got sort of a line on what Inman knows.

"There's fifteen or twenty of the big guys that'd give a neat slice of jack to learn who Inman really was. When they knew, Inman wouldn't last long. If you're monkeying around with anybody that gives the name of Inman, just gimme the money to go get myself measured for a suit of black. I'll need it before I get any fatter, anyway; and I may need it as soon as the tailor can get it fitted."

Paul Pry arose, crossed to the closet where he kept his collection of drums.

He took down a Buddhist temple drum that resembled a huge bronze bowl. This drum was merely rubbed into sound, not struck with a stick as other drums were.

Paul Pry took the leather-covered stick and started rubbing the lip of the drum. His hand moved slowly. At first there was no sound whatever. Then, as the speed of the rubbing stick increased, there sounded a low monotone of sound which filled the apartment, yet which seemed to emanate from no particular source.

"It drives me nuts," said Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry said nothing until after the last bit of sound had died away. Then he sighed, raised his eyes to Mugs Magoo's face.

"Alcohol, Mugs, has robbed your ears of their sense of rhythm."

"If they'd only rob 'em of a sense of sound, so far as those

drums are concerned, so I couldn't hear 'em, I'd be better satisfied."

Paul Pry let his eyes rest dreamily upon the drum.

"It soothes the soul, Mugs. That's why they use it as a preliminary to worship in those temples where the religion is a philosophical rite of inner meditation. It's a wonderful philosophy, Buddhism, Mugs, and the drum has a tendency to fill my mind with inner quiet, a comparative poise that's so necessary to concentration."

Mugs Magoo refilled his whiskey glass.

"Yeah," he said. "It's a great philosophy maybe. But the trouble with them Buddhists is that they don't wear no pants."

Paul Pry grinned.

"That's begging the question, Mugs."

"The hell it is," retorted Mugs Magoo, "you're goin' heathen, working your mind up to the right pitch with a lot o' boomin' drums. One o' these days you'll take to smokin' one o' these here *hookahs*, an' throwin' your pants away. I'm humorin' you now, because if you was dyin' o' pneumonia, I'd give you your last wishes. You're just the same as a dyin' man right now. And if you're monkeyin' around with a guy that goes by the name of George Inman, you're just the same as parked on a marble slab."

Paul Pry laid down the drum stick.

"I'm glad you mentioned this Inman again, Mugs. It reminds me of a telephone call I almost forgot to make."

He crossed the room to the telephone, called the number which the clerk at the Billington Hotel had given him.

"Hello," he said as a feminine voice answered, "this is George Inman, at the Billington Hotel. Was someone calling me?"

At the other end of the room there came a startled gasp, a choking exclamation that was mingled with the sputtering noise of a man who is almost strangling.

The woman's voice crisped a swift comment.

"Where are you, George dear? In your room?"

It was the voice of the woman who had worn the white fur coat.

"Yes," said Paul Pry.

"Just a minute, George, there's a friend of mine wants to speak with you. He wants to give you an important message."

There came the sounds over the wire of rustling motion, then a man's voice.

"Yeah, hello," it gruffed.

"Yes?" said Paul Pry.

"Well, listen," said the man's voice, speaking hastily. "I'm a friend of Lola's. You recognized her voice over the telephone?"

"Yes. Sure," said Paul Pry, "but I'm afraid I don't want to deal with any friend of hers. My business is with her."

"Yeah, sure it is," said the man. "But she can't get to come alone. She wanted me to give you a ring so I could explain what's happened."

"She's in a jam, and she's got to see you right away. Now you wait right there in your room. Keep the door locked. Don't open up for anyone until she gets there, and don't even answer the telephone. Get me?"

"We're coming over just as soon as we can make a break, and we want to be sure we ain't tailed. See? Now you and Lola can go ahead with that thing just like you planned, only you gotta wait until she gets there. Here she is on the telephone."

The man relinquished the instrument. The voice of the girl who had worn the fur coat came to Paul Pry's ears.

"It's all right, George. I'll explain when we get there. Only sit right in the room. Don't open until you hear someone rap twice, then a pause, then three raps, then another pause, and then a single rap.

"That'll be me. The man with me is O.K."

"O.K.," he said, at length. "If you say it's O.K. I guess it is."

"Right over," said the woman's voice. "You stay right there until we get there."

Paul Pry hung up the receiver, turned to stare into Mugs Magoo's florid features.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Mugs. "I thought you'd done the damndest fool things a guy could ever do—but being George Inman! That takes the cake! An' when you spilled that dope it made me swallow my drink of whiskey down the wrong side of my throat, and anything that'll make a guy do that with really good whiskey, is a public calamity.

"Go ahead an' play around while you've got the chance, because when you get all stretched out with a coroner's jury starin' at the doctor, while he points out the course of the bullets

through the body, you won't have no kick outa life at all. Just go right ahead, guy, only shake hands with me before you go out again. I hate to see you go, but you might as well finish it up and get the suspense over with."

Paul Pry grinned.

"Mugs," he said solemnly, "I have an idea that I'm going to meet some tough gangsters. That is, Mugs, they think they're tough. But, to me, they're going to be nice little goosies, laying golden eggs."

Mugs Magoo disregarded the glass in favor of more direct action. As he removed the neck of the bottle from appreciative lips, he muttered: "An' there's a frail at the bottom of it. That's a cinch."

Paul Pry nodded. He was putting on his coat, hefting the balance of his sword cane. "Yes, Mugs, you're right again. There's a lady at the bottom of it, Mugs, a lady who says yes."

Mugs Magoo extended a solemn hand.

"You was a good pal," he said, "—while you lasted!"

5

The streets of the city held that damp cheerlessness which comes a couple of hours before dawn. They were almost deserted, and Paul Pry, anxious to escape observation, walked for three rapid blocks before he swung over to the main boulevard where he knew he could find a cab even at that hour.

His actions were not even furtive. He had a coil of light rope wound around his waist, a little handbag that contained certain articles. He was smiling, rather a fixed smile, and his eyes were diamond hard.

Paul Pry sent the cab to the address given on the purloined card as being the residence of Frank Jamison. The apartment hotel was of exactly the type he had expected.

Paul Pry entered the hotel after having paid the cab, approached the desk. He wrote his name on the register.

"Something for about a month," he said. "Frank Jamison knows me. He said I'd be comfortable here. I'd like to get on the same floor he's on. Maybe I'll be longer than a mouth. Maybe it won't be so long, but you get a month's rent cash on the nail."

The man at the desk nodded.

"Mr. Jamison's on the fourth, 438. I can let you have 431. That's just a ways down the corridor and on the other side."

"O.K.," said Paul Pry. "Jamison ain't in, is he?"

"I don't think so. He's out quite late."

"Yeah, I know. Give'm a buzz, just in case."

The man behind the counterlike desk stepped to the glassed-in partition behind which sat a telephone operator.

"Give Jamison in 438 a jingle. Tell him his friend's here, Mr. Pry."

The girl plugged in a line, shook her head, after an interval.

"Out," said the man as he swung around to face Paul Pry.

"Now listen, Frank Jamison and me are going to do some business that we ain't telling all of Frank's friends about. So when Frank comes in, he'll have some guys with him. Just don't say anything about me being here."

The clerk was businesslike.

"We make a practice of minding our own business here, Mr. Pry. You make your own announcements. And the first installment, by the way, will be one hundred dollars."

Paul Pry handed the clerk two bills.

"Never mind the receipt. I'm hitting the hay. The baggage'll get here in the morning."

Paul Pry went to the fourth floor, was shown to his apartment. He tipped the boy who took him up, waited until he heard the elevator door clang shut, and then walked down the corridor to 438, fitted his key assortment to the lock until he had the proper skeleton, heard the bolt click, and walked in. He left the hall door open, and the light from the hallway flooded enough of the room to give him the lay of the land.

Paul Pry entered the bedroom, ripped the blankets from the bed, went to the bathroom, soaked the blankets in water, wrung out some of the surplus, took the wet blankets into the front room, suspended them by their corners.

He worked with swift precision, and used the coil of light rope, hardly more than a heavy twine. He anchored this rope to the chandeliers, easing the weight of the blankets on the light rope so that he would not pull out the lighting fixture.

When he had finished, he had two wet blankets suspended in

such a manner that they almost blocked the rest of the room from the doorway.

He took from his pocket a little metallic object that resembled a fountain pen, stood a little distance back from the wet blankets, pointed the metallic object, and pressed a hidden button.

There was a dull explosion, sounding hardly more loud than the smashing of a small inflated paper bag. A stream of swirling vapor mushroomed out until it hit the wet blankets. Then it seemed to be enveloped, the tear gas having an affinity for the moist surface.

Paul Pry stepped swiftly out of the apartment room, closed the door behind him, used his skeleton key, and twisted the bolt of the lock.

Then he went down the corridor, took some of the light rope, measured off the length of the corridor, and took a round door stop from the little bag which he carried. He screwed this door stop into the wood of the corridor, well over to one side, made a loop in the rope with a bowline knot holding it against slips, dropped the loop over the door stop, then screwed a similar door stop into the other side of the corridor.

When he tightened the rope, he had a perfectly taut line some three inches above the level of the floor. He surveyed the result, nodded, removed the rope, leaving the door stops in place, and went back to his own room.

The place where he had put the door stops was almost opposite the entrance of apartment 431, the one on which he had paid the rent.

He yawned, removed his shoes, closed, but did not lock the door, lit a cigarette, and sprawled out in one of the overstuffed easy chairs.

There was the first glint of dawn in the air, although the interior of the apartment hotel still remained murked with darkness when Paul Pry consulted his wrist watch and frowned. It looked very much as though he had drawn a blank.

The slamming of the elevator door at the end of the corridor came to his ears, and his stockinged feet came to the carpeted floor of his room with swift silence. He approached the door, opened it the merest crack.

There were three men walking down the hallway with grim

efficiency. One of them carried a black bag. His right shoulder was bulky with bandage.

They paused before room 438. Keys rattled.

"Anyway," husked one of the men in a low voice, "Inman was registered there. He must have—"

"Shut up," snapped one of the group.

The hoarse voice ceased abruptly.

The man who held the bag opened the door of the room.

The three barged in there.

Paul Pry stepped out of his door, tossed the loop of twine over the door stop, twisted the other end of the rope over the other door stop, stepped back in the doorway of his room. He made no effort to conceal himself. His shoes, laces knotted, were in his belt. His eyes, diamond hard, were staring down the corridor.

The door of 438 burst open. Three men spewed from the room, hands stretched outward. There was the glint of the dim light on blued steel, the sound of terror stricken oaths.

The man who had fitted the key to the lock continued to carry the bag. But there was a gun in his other hand.

They ran down the corridor with awkward steps, their streaming eyes of no use to them. Blinded, they groped and stumbled. They passed Paul Pry's door, and then hit the rope.

The first man took the second with him as he went down. The third stumbled over the heap. A gun went off with a roar, and the sound of curses followed the detonation.

Paul Pry stepped from his room.

His position could not have been chosen with better care, nor to better advantage. He held a blackjack in his hand, the leather thong looped around his wrist.

The man with the bag straightened.

The blackjacket did its stuff with smooth efficiency. Paul Pry's hand closed about the handle of the black bag as the grip of the man who had been sapped relaxed.

There sounded a woman's scream. A figure in pajamas opened one of the doors. Another shot rang out. The man in pajamas jumped back for the shelter of his room.

Paul Pry walked down the hall toward the back stairs. His stockinged feet gave no sound. As he reached the stairs, he slipped his shoes on, and ran down the staircase.

Day was dawning as he slipped the chain on a side exit and

walked out into the street. The street was calm with the gray tranquility of early dawn.

Paul Pry walked swiftly, slowed his pace when he was well away from the building, picked up a cab after he had been walking for about ten minutes. He gave the address of a downtown hotel, and was taken there at top speed.

He discharged the cab, broke his trail by going to the Union Depot in another cab and taking a third cab to his apartment.

Mugs Magoo was asleep, sprawled in the easy chair, his relaxed hand stretched toward the whiskey bottle. The bottle was empty.

Paul Pry grinned, closed the door, locked it, turned his attention to the bag. It was locked. He took his knife and slit it open.

The interior, back of where the leather bulged out through the cut edge, showed a mass of greenbacks.

"There should be ten grand here," said Paul Pry.

He chuckled softly as he counted it and found that it was an even ten thousand dollars.

He took the bag and the money, crossed to the safe, opened the fireproof receptacle, tossed in bag and money, closed the door, spun the dial of the combination, and went to bed.

Past experience had taught him that Mugs Magoo desired nothing more than to be left alone. He would awaken presently, seek the water tap and then go to bed. In the morning he would be as glassily-eyed efficient as ever.

Paul Pry slept the morning through.

The afternoon shadows were creeping across the street, when he felt a hand at his shoulder.

He looked up into the puzzled countenance of Mugs Magoo.

"Listen, guy," said Mugs, "I don't want to disturb your beauty sleep, but there's a lot o' stuff goin' on, an' I'm afraid it's something that you're concerned about."

Paul Pry grinned the sleep out of his eyes, and ran his fingers through tousled hair.

"Shoot," he commented, briefly.

"It's about Inman and Lola Beeker, and this guy, Sacanoni," said Mugs Magoo, speaking rapidly, and out of one side of his mouth. "It seems Jamison got Sacanoni, and used the muscle

stuff to make Lola Beeker get ten grand that they'd put away for getaway money in case anything happened.

"Then it seems Lola Beeker knew who this guy Inman really was. They made her turn him up. But she worked some sort of a funny gag, and Inman slipped out of his room in the hotel with the whole damned place literally swarming with gunmen.

"But they let Sacanoni go when the jane kicked through with her share of the info and the ten grand. Then Beeker and Sacanoni did a fade."

Paul Pry yawned.

"But," he said, "why wake me up?"

"Because," said Mugs, "there's a late tip out that this Inman that's been raising so much hell was really Sacanoni all the time. The gangs knew that Lola Beeker knew who Inman was, but they never figured he might be just another name for Sacanoni. So, then, who was this guy at the Billington Hotel?"

Paul Pry reached for the cigarettes.

"Mugs," he observed, "you still haven't any reason for disturbing *my* slumbers."

Mugs Magoo blurted out that which came next.

"The hell I haven't. Listen to this. When Jamison and his gang went to salt the ten grand something happened and they got slicked out of it. They thought it was this guy, Inman, only—"

"Only what?" asked Paul Pry.

"Only they found that some guy had come in and taken a room right where it'd do the most good, and that this bird registered under the name of Paul Pry! And there's ten thousand berries gone bye-bye."

Paul Pry grinned.

"Mugs," he said, "you misjudge me. All I did was to deliver a message. I delivered it to a boy. I simply told him 'The lady says yes,' and that was all."

Mugs nodded solemnly.

"But there's ten grand in the safe this morning."

Paul Pry let his face brighten.

"Maybe. Mugs, while we were both asleep, a dear little goose came and laid another golden egg!"

Dressed to Kill

"I'll see that the undertaker gives you the breaks when it comes to the music," said "Mugs" Magoo as Paul Pry started out. For he knew his friend was about to dance with death. Pry's very costume was enough to turn any fancy-dress ball into a murder masquerade.

1

The Smuggled Letter

Looking very uncomfortable in his evening clothes, "Mugs" Magoo rolled his glassy eyes and nodded across the table to Paul Pry.

"The place is full of crooks," he said.

Paul Pry, the very opposite in appearance of his companion, wore evening clothes as though they had been molded to fit him. He looked at Mugs Magoo with eyes that glittered with attention.

"What sort of crooks, Mugs?" he asked.

"Well," said Magoo, "it's a funny set-up. I've got a hunch if you knew what was going on here tonight, you'd know where the Legget diamond is."

"What do you mean, Mugs?"

Mugs Magoo gestured with a fork. "That guy over there," he said, "is Tom Meek."

"All right," Paul Pry said, "who's Tom Meek?"

"A letter smuggler."

"A letter smuggler, Mugs?" asked Paul Pry. "I never heard of such a thing."

Mugs Magoo manipulated his fork so as to get a mouthful of food. His right arm was off at the shoulder and his left hand had to do the work of both cutting and conveying food while he was eating, gesticulating while he was talking.

"Tom Meek," he said, "smuggles letters out of the jail. That's where he picks up his side money."

"He's a jailer?" asked Paul Pry.

"Yeah, sort of a deputy, third-assistant jailer. He's hung around the jail through three administrations. He smuggles letters out for prisoners."

Paul Pry nodded and filed the information away for what it might be worth. His keen eyes stared at the man Mugs had indicated. A small inconspicuous individual, with gray hair, high cheek bones and watery eyes.

"Looks harmless, Mugs," said Paul Pry.

Mugs Magoo nodded casually. "Yeah," he said, "he don't do anything except smuggle letters. That's his racket. He won't touch anything else. He won't even take hop in to the prisoners."

"All right," persisted Paul Pry, "why do you think that Tom Meek, the letter smuggler, knows anything about the Legget diamond?"

"He don't," Mugs Magoo agreed readily enough. "But you see that heavy-set fellow over there at the table, with the jaw that's the blue-black, in spite of the fact he's been shaved not over two hours ago, the guy with the black hair and the big chest?"

"Yes," said Paul Pry, "he looks like a lawyer."

"He is a lawyer. That's Frank Bostwick, the criminal lawyer, and he's attorney for George Tompkins, and Tompkins is the man that's in jail for pulling the robbery that netted the Legget diamond."

"All right," said Paul Pry, "go on, Mugs."

Mugs swung his head in the other direction. "And the tall dignified coot over there with the starched collar and the glasses is Edgar Patten, and Patten's the confidential representative of the insurance company that had the Legget diamond insured."

Paul Pry watched Mugs Magoo thoughtfully, his eyes glittering with interest despite their preoccupation.

"Well, Mugs," he said, "give me the lowdown on it and perhaps I can turn the information to some advantage."

* * *

Paul Pry lived by his wits alone. He would have indignantly denied that he was a detective in any sense of the word; on the other hand, he could have demonstrated that he was not a crook. Had he been called upon to give his business, he might have described himself as a professional opportunist.

Mugs Magoo, on the other hand, had a definite status. He was confidential adviser to Paul Pry.

Mugs never forgot a name, a face, or a connection. At one time he had been "camera-eye" man on the metropolitan police force. A political shake-up had thrown him out of employment. An accident had taken off his right arm at the shoulder. Booze had done the rest. When Paul Pry found the man he was a human derelict, seated on the sidewalk by the corner of a bank building, holding a derby hat in his left hand. The hat was half filled with pencils, with a few small coins at the bottom.

Paul Pry had dropped in half a dollar, taken out one pencil and then been interested in something he had seen in the rugged weather-beaten face, in the flash of gratitude which had filled the unwinking glassy eyes. He had engaged him in conversation and had learned that the man was a veritable encyclopedia of underworld knowledge.

That had been the last day Mugs Magoo had known want. It marked the formation of a strange association by which Mugs furnished Paul Pry with information and the chain-lightning mind of Paul Pry translated that information to pecuniary advantage.

Mugs Magoo rolled his glassy eyes in another survey of the room and then turned once more to Paul Pry.

"Here's probably what's happening," he said. "Frank Bostwick, the lawyer is making a deal with Edgar Patten, the adjustor for the insurance company, to get Tompkins out with a light sentence or maybe get him turned loose without even a trial. The price he's going to pay is the return of the Legget diamond.

"The cops have got a dead open-and-shut case on Tompkins but they haven't been able to find the diamond. Tompkins is an old hand at the game and he's sitting tight."

"Then," said Paul Pry, "you think that Bostwick knows where the diamond is?"

Mugs Magoo stared at the table where Tom Meek was dining in solitude. "I wouldn't doubt," he said, "but what Bostwick has

worked up a deal with Patten and smuggled a letter in to Tompkins by Meek. Then Tompkins has sent a reply back and Meek has got it to deliver."

"Why doesn't Meek deliver it then?" Pry wanted to know.

"That's not the way Meek works," said Mugs Magoo. "He's one of those cagey individuals that never comes out with anything in the open. He'll sit around there and eat his dinner. Then he'll get up and leave the place. The letter will be planted under his plate or under his napkin somewhere, and Bostwick will go over and get it. Then Bostwick will get in touch with Patten and they'll fix up the deal between them."

Paul Pry surveyed the dining room of the speakeasy with wary eyes that missed nothing.

"I could," said Mugs Magoo plaintively, "stand another bottle of that wine."

Paul Pry summoned the waiter. "Another pint," he said.

Mugs Magoo made a grimace. "A pint," he said, "is a half-bottle."

"A quart, waiter," Paul Pry remarked.

Mugs Magoo nodded his satisfaction. "Gonna telephone," he said. "Be back by the time the wine gets here."

He scraped back his chair and started in the general direction of the telephones.

It was at that moment that Tom Meek summoned the waiter, paid his check, and arose from the table. He was halfway to the door when the light dimmed to a pale blue effect of imitation moonlight and the orchestra struck up a seductive waltz.

In the confusion of the milling couples on the floor and other couples rising spontaneously from tables and twining into each other's arms, Frank Bostwick, the lawyer, got to his feet and unobtrusively started toward the table which Meek had vacated.

Paul Pry took instant advantage of the opportunity and the confusion. As swiftly and noiselessly as a trout, gliding through the black depths of a mountain pool, he slipped over to the table where Meek had been sitting. His hands made a questioning exploration of the table. The tips of the searching fingers encountered some flat object beneath the table-cloth and within a very few moments the flat object had been transferred to Paul Pry's hand.

It was a letter folded and sealed, and Paul Pry made no attempt

to read it but folded it once again and thrust it into his shoe. Then he swung slightly to one side and paused before a table where a woman was seated.

The woman was one of a trio who had entered the speakeasy, either the mother or the older sister of the young woman who accompanied her, and who was at the moment sliding into the first steps of the waltz with the young man of the party. She was amazed and flattered at Paul Pry's attention and, after a moment, when startled surprise gave way to simpering acquiescence in her expression, she permitted herself to be guided out to the center of the room which was reserved for the dance floor.

Paul Pry moved gracefully in the steps of the waltz. He had an opportunity to peer over the woman's shoulder and see that Frank Bostwick, the lawyer, was seated at the table that had been vacated by Tom Meek, the letter smuggler.

And Paul Pry's smile became a chuckle as he realized that the attorney had not observed the surreptitious theft of the missive that Tom Meek had left beneath the table-cloth.

Paul Pry was a handsome individual. Moreover, he had a ready poise and a magnetic manner. His companion was grateful and pleased. And, as Paul Pry returned her to her table at the termination of the waltz, he gave to the older woman the triumph of waiting a few moments until the younger couple had returned to the table. Nor did the sharp eyes of Paul Pry miss the sudden look of incredulous surprise on the face of the younger woman, or the expression of triumphant elation upon the face of the woman with whom he had been dancing.

Then Paul Pry bowed from the waist, muttered his pleasure, and returned once more to his own table.

The chair in which Mugs Magoo had been sitting was now occupied by a woman some twenty-seven years of age. She had a willowy figure, a daring backless gown, and blue eyes that stared at Paul Pry with frank invitation.

Paul Pry paused. "I beg your pardon," he said.

The woman's eyes rested upon his face with a directness of gaze that was frankly seductive. The sensuous red lips parted in a smile.

"You should," she said.

Paul Pry raised his eyebrows.

"Not," said the young woman still smiling, "that I object so much to your appearance, as to the stereotyped manner in which you have tried to pick me up. I presume you will pretend that this was your table and—" She broke off abruptly with an expression of dismay suffusing her features. "Good heavens!" she said. "It *is* your table!"

Paul Pry remained standing and smiling.

"Oh!" she said. "I'm so sorry. I had left the room and the lights went down. You see, my escort was called away on a business matter and I returned to my table alone. I just became confused, I guess."

She made a motion as if to rise, but her wide blue eyes remained fastened steadily upon Paul Pry's face.

"Well," he said, "since you're here, and since, apparently, your escort has left, why not finish the evening with me?"

"Oh, no!" she said. "I couldn't. Please don't misunderstand. I assure you it was just an accident."

"Of course it was an accident," Paul Pry said and pulled out the other chair, sat down and smiled across at her. "The sort of an accident," he went on, "that fate sometimes throws in the way of a lone man who appreciates wide blue eyes and coppery hair."

"Flatterer!" she exclaimed.

Paul Pry, glancing up at that moment, saw Mugs Magoo walking toward the table. And Mugs Magoo abruptly became conscious of the woman who was seated opposite Paul Pry.

The camera-eye man stopped dead in his tracks while his glassy eyes flickered over the features of the woman. Then Mugs Magoo raised his left hand to his ear lobe and tugged at it once, sharply. Then he turned and walked away.

In the course of the association which had grown up between the two adventurers, it had been necessary to arrange an elaborate code of signals, so that, in times of emergency, Mugs Magoo might convey complete ideas to Paul Pry by a single sign. And in their code, the gestures Mugs had just completed meant: "The party who is talking to you knows me and is dangerous. I'm getting under cover so I won't be recognized. You must extricate yourself from a dangerous position at once."

2

As a Highwayman

■

It was as Mugs Magoo turned away, that the cooing voice of the young woman reached Paul Pry's ears.

"Well," she said, "since you're so attractive and so nice about it, perhaps I will make an exception just this once. Won't it be a lark going through the evening pretending that we're old acquaintances, and each of us not really knowing who the other is. You may call me Stella. And your name?"

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Paul Pry with enthusiasm. "You may call me Paul."

"And we're old friends, Paul, meeting for the first time after an absence of years?"

"Yes," he said, "but don't make the absence too long. It doesn't sound plausible. Having once known you, a man would never permit too great an interval of separation."

She laughed lightly. "And so you believe in fate?" she asked.

Paul Pry nodded, his lips smiling but his eyes watchful.

"Perhaps," she said, "it was, after all, fate." She sighed, and for the first time since she had sat at his table, lowered her eyes.

"What is fate?" asked Paul Pry.

"The fact that I should meet you just when I needed someone . . ." Her voice trailed off into silence and she shook her head vehemently.

"No," she said decisively, "I mustn't go into that."

The orchestra struck up a rollicking one-step. The blue eyes once more impacted full upon his face.

"And do we dance, Paul?" she asked.

He nodded and rose, taking the back of her chair in his hand, moving it away from the table as she swung up, in front of him, her arms open, her lips smiling invitingly.

They moved out onto the floor, a couple well calculated to catch the eye of any connoisseur of the dance. Paul Pry, moving as gracefully and lightly as though his feet had been floating on air just above the floor, the girl well curved but willowy, straight-limbed and radiating a consciousness of her sex.

"Do you know," she said, "that I was contemplating suicide earlier in the evening?"

Paul Pry tightened his arms in a gesture of protection. "You're joking," he exclaimed.

"No," she said. "It's a fact."

"Would you care to tell me about it?" he asked.

"I think," she said slowly, "I would."

They danced for a few moments in silence and in some subtle way she managed to convey the impression that she had thrown herself entirely upon his masculine strength as a bulwark of protection. "But," she added after the interval of silence, "I couldn't tell you here."

"Where?" he asked.

"I have an apartment," she said, "if you care to come there."

"Splendid," Paul Pry said enthusiastically.

"Let's go then," she told him. "I was here only for the excitement. Only to get my mind away from myself. Now you've given me just the stimulus that I need to restore my perspective."

The music stopped.

She gave just the faintest hint of pressing her body close to his and then managed to forestall the intimacy of the moment and become, once more, respectably distant, standing with her hand on his arm, her frank blue eyes smiling into his.

"A wonderful dance," he said applauding.

"You dance divinely, " she breathed.

There was no encore. She gently exerted pressure on his arm.

"Would you care to leave now?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed," he told her.

Paul Pry lived by his wits and he was an opportunist. Moreover, he was, as Mugs Magoo so frequently pointed out, entirely without prudence. Paul Pry would walk into any danger which offered a reasonable amount of excitement, and do it with the utmost *sangfroid,* trusting to his ingenuity to extricate himself from any untoward complications.

Paul Pry, upon this occasion, took only a reasonable amount of precaution to ascertain that he was not being shadowed as he left the cabaret. Having satisfied himself that no one was on his trail, he handed the young woman into a taxicab, followed her, and was lighting a cigarette as the cab driver slammed the door and nodded his comprehension of the address the young woman had given him.

It was but a short ride to the apartment and Paul Pry followed docilely into the elevator, out of the car again, and down a corridor. A close observer would have noticed that his right hand hovered near the left lapel of his coat as the young woman opened the door of the apartment and switched on the lights. But a moment later his hand was back at his side, for the apartment was, quite apparently, empty, unless someone were concealed behind a closed door. And Paul Pry always claimed that he could get a gun from its holster long before a person could twist the knob of a door, open it and draw a bead.

"My God, Paul," she said, "I'm glad that I met you!"

Paul Pry watched the outer door of the apartment move slowly shut until the spring lock automatically clicked into position and then smiled at her. "It was," he said, "a real pleasure to me, Stella."

"And," she said, smiling at him with half-parted lips and steady eyes, "we're old friends. Wasn't that the understanding, Paul?"

"Yes, Stella."

"Very well then," she said, "I'm going to get out of these clothes and get into something comfortable. Wait here and make yourself at home."

Paul Pry's hand once more hovered about the lapel of his coat as she opened the door of the connecting bedroom, but the door closed without event and Paul Pry moved to a chair which gave him a commanding position, sat down, crossed his knees and lit a cigarette.

Five minutes later the bedroom door opened and Stella came out, a vision of filmy loveliness. And it may or may not have been accident that she had placed a very bright light directly behind her, that she stood for a long moment in the doorway of the bedroom before switching out the light, and that the brilliant illumination transformed her silken coverings into a mere filmy aura which served to frame, without concealing, her every curve.

She switched out the light and came to him.

She perched on the arm of his chair; her fingers smoothed his hair; one leg swinging free in a pendulum-like arc, swung clear of the filmy silken covering.

"Paul," she said, "really and truly I feel as though I've known you all my life."

"Go ahead then," he said, "and confide in me."

She sighed and her hands dropped from his hair, brushed lightly along his cheek and then came to rest on his shoulders.

"Paul," she said, "don't look at me while I tell you. I can't bear that. Sit just as you are and listen."

"Listening," he told her.

"Did you ever hear of a man called 'Silver' Dawson?"

"No," said Paul Pry. "Who is Silver Dawson?"

"The worst fiend unhung," she said with vehemence.

"That still leaves a lot to my imagination," Paul Pry reminded.

"He's got the letters," she told him.

"What letters?"

"The letters that I wrote to a man who betrayed my confidence."

"Indeed?" said Paul Pry.

"Yes," she said. "And you see I was married at the time."

"Ah," said Paul Pry in a tone of quickening interest, "and you're married now?"

"No, my husband is dead."

"I see," he said, in a tone of one who waits for further revelations.

"But he left this peculiar will," she said, "in which my inheritance was predicated upon my fidelity. The will contained a proviso that if it should appear I had been unfaithful to him during our married life, the inheritance was to go to a charitable institution."

"I see," said Paul Pry, "and the letters threaten to complicate things?"

"The letters," she said, "would ruin me."

"You shouldn't have written them," he told her.

She slid her palm under his chin, tilted his head so that her eyes could stare down into his. "Tell me," she said, "did you ever do anything that you shouldn't have done?"

"Lots of times," he said.

"All right then. So have I."

Paul Pry laughed and patted her hand.

"And," she said meaningfully, "I intend to do other things that I shouldn't do. It's lots of fun. But I don't like to lose an inheritance on account of an innocent affair."

"Innocent?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Of course."

"Then the letters can't be so very bad," he told her.

"The letters," she said archly, "are quite likely to be misunderstood. You understand I have always been a woman of restrictions and inhibitions. It goes back to the time of my girlhood. I was brought up by old-fashioned parents and I was the victim of a too puritanical training. As a result, when I started to write, all of my repressed desires came to the front and were manifest in the letters."

"I take it, then," said Paul Pry, "the letters would not listen well in front of a jury."

"Well," she said judicially, "unless the members of the jury were pretty well up on love-making they'd get some great ideas."

"Therefore," said Paul Pry, "you do not wish to have the letters read before a jury."

"Naturally."

"What," asked Paul Pry, "does Silver Dawson say about it?"

"He's a cold-blooded snake," she said. "He's called Silver because of his shock of white hair, that makes him look old, patient, dignified and sort of grand. But he'd steal the pennies off the eyes of a corpse."

"Naturally," said Paul Pry, "he has some proposition to offer."

"Yes," she said. "It's ruinous."

"Certainly," said Paul Pry, "he wouldn't want more than a percentage of what you inherited."

"It isn't money he wants," she said. "He wants things that I cannot give."

Her voice lowered until it was hardly more than a whisper.

"He said that I must go to Europe with him."

Her face took on an expression of virginal, injured innocence. Her eyes seemed limpid with tears that were about to spring to the surface and she stared pathetically at Paul Pry.

"And what do you intend to do?" asked Paul Pry.

"I told you," she said, "I was going to commit suicide."

"Now you've changed your mind?" he asked her, petting her hand.

"Yes. I've so much to live for—now."

"Well," pressed Paul Pry, "haven't you any scheme?"

She looked at him in impersonal appraisal. Just the sort of a glance which a scientist might give to an impaled butterfly before classifying it.

"Well," she said slowly, "I have a scheme which I was thinking of while we were dancing. You seemed so graceful and well knit, so poised and completely able to take care of yourself, that a wild idea flashed through my head. But I'm afraid that it's hardly practicable, and it's something I have no right to ask a virtual stranger."

"An old friend, Stella," he said, patting her hand.

"Very well then," she said, "as an old friend you're entitled to hear the scheme, and—to have the prerogatives of an old friendship."

She leaned forward and kissed him lingeringly, full upon the lips.

"Ah," said Paul Pry. "The duties of such a friendship certainly cannot detract from its net advantage!"

She laughed and pinched his cheek. "Silly boy!" she said.

Paul Pry said nothing, but sat waiting.

Once more the blue eyes gave him that appraising glance, and then she spoke in low, throaty tones.

"Silver Dawson has a certain circle of acquaintances, not in the

best class of society but, nevertheless, a wealthy class. He's giving a masquerade party tomorrow night at his house. I just had an idea that you might capitalize on that. You see, the guests will be in all sorts of costumes. I thought it might be possible for you to go as a highwayman."

"A highwayman?" asked Paul Pry.

"Yes. You know with a mask and a gun and everything. It would make an interesting costume."

"But," said Paul Pry, "what good would it do?"

"Simply this," she said. "You could break away from the dance and move around the house. I could show you where the papers were. If you encountered any of the servants or anyone, you could pull your gun and act the part of a highwayman. If anything went wrong you could claim that it was merely in fun as a part of the masquerade.

"But nothing will go wrong. You can get in and get the papers. I know exactly where he keeps them. Then you could mingle with the guests, attract attention for your unusual costume, slip out and join me on the outside."

"But," said Paul Pry, "I have no invitation."

"You wouldn't need any," she said. "There is a ladder in the back of the house and we could put it up to one of the second-story windows. Those are always unlocked. You could climb in."

"No," said Paul Pry slowly, "that wouldn't be such a good scheme. It would be better to try and crash the party. I might forge an invitation."

"There's a thought!" she exclaimed. "I could get you an invitation. You could walk right in the front door and then you could slip away from the crowd and go up to his study where he keeps the letters."

"But they would be under lock and key, wouldn't they?"

"No. That is, they'd be in a desk and the desk has a lock on it; but you could handle that lock easily enough. I think I could get you a skeleton key that would work it."

Paul Pry slipped an arm about her waist. "I'll do it, Stella," he said, "for an old friend."

She laughed throatily. "Such a gallant creature," she said, "deserves another—prerogative of friendship."

She leaned forward.

3

Murder Masquerade

Mugs Magoo was seated in the apartment when Paul Pry latchkeyed the door and walked in. Magoo looked up in glassy-eyed appraisal. Then he reached for the half-filled whiskey bottle at this elbow, poured out a generous drink in a tumbler and drained it with a single motion.

"Well," he said, "I never expected to see you again."

"You always were a cheerful cuss," said Paul Pry, depositing his coat and hat in the closet.

"Just a fool for luck," said Mugs Magoo jovially. "You've had an appointment that's six months overdue that I know of. There's a marble slab all picked out for you and why you haven't been on it for a long time is more than I know."

"Mugs," said Paul Pry laughing, "you're a natural pessimist."

"Pessimist nothing," said Mugs. "You disregard signals, you walk into the damnedest traps and how you ever get out is more than I know."

"How do you mean?" asked Paul Pry.

"The woman that was with you at the table," Mugs Magoo

said, "was 'Slick' Stella Molay, and she was covering Tom Meek. I saw you slip over and get the letter and she saw you, too. Frank Bostwick is just a lawyer. He's all right to stand up in front of a jury and wave his arms and talk about the Constitution, but he isn't fast on his feet. That's why Tompkins had Slick Stella Molay follow Tom Meek to make sure that the letter got delivered."

"I see," said Paul Pry. "Then Slick Stella knew that I had the letter. Is that it?"

"Of course she did."

"Why didn't she accuse me of it, or try to steal it?"

"Because she knew it wouldn't do any good. She knew that you were wise to the play and that you were going to read the letter."

"What did she want with me then?" asked Paul Pry.

Mugs Magoo gave a snorting gesture of disgust. "Want with you!" he exclaimed. "She wanted to get you out of the way, of course. She wanted to put you where you'll be pushing up daisies."

Paul Pry grinned gleefully. "Well," he said, "I'm still here."

"Still here because of that providence which watches over fools and idiots," Mugs Magoo told him. "With the chances you take and the way you walk into trouble, it's a wonder you haven't been killed months ago. Why, do you know that Slick Stella Molay is the one who got 'Big' Ben Desmond killed in Chicago?"

"Indeed," said Paul Pry, raising polite eyebrows, "and how did Big Ben Desmond cash in? Did she shoot him or use poison?"

Mugs Magoo poured himself another drink of whiskey. "Not that baby," he said. "She's too slick for that."

"All right," said Paul Pry, "I confess to my interest, Mugs. Go ahead and quit keeping me in suspense."

"Well," said Mugs Magoo, "it was so slick there wasn't a flaw in it. The grand jury looked it all over and couldn't do anything about it."

Paul Pry relaxed comfortably in a reclining chair, lit a cigarette and let his face show polite interest.

"Do you mean to say, Mugs, that a person could murder

another, under such circumstances that a grand jury could look it over and couldn't find anything wrong with it?"

"Slick Stella Molay could," said Mugs Magoo.

"And just how did she do it?"

"She got Big Ben Desmond sold on the idea that he was to go to a masquerade ball dressed as a highwayman. Then she got him to go prowling around the house of the man that was giving the masquerade. That man was in his bedroom standing in front of a wall safe, putting some jewelry away, when he heard the sound of a door opening. He turned around and saw a man dressed like a crook, with gloves and a mask, a gun and all the rest of it.

"The guy who was giving the party was heeled, and he just snapped up his gun and plopped five shells into Big Ben Dawson's guts before he found out that he was shooting a guest who had just been walking around the house in a masquerade costume."

Paul Pry yawned and stifled the yawn with four polite fingers.

"Indeed, Mugs," he said. "Rather crude. I had thought it might be sufficiently novel to be interesting."

"Well," said Mugs Magoo, "it was novel enough to get Big Ben Desmond out of the way; and the grand jury couldn't do anything to the guy that killed him because they claimed the guy was entitled to shoot a burglar. And Slick Stella Molay was out in the clear. She put an onion in her handkerchief, went before the grand jury full of weeps and red-eyed grief. They say her eyes looked like hell when she was testifying, but she was damned careful her legs were all right. She wore the best pair of stockings in her wardrobe and when she crossed her knees the grand jury decided that, no matter what had happened, Slick Stella didn't know anything about it."

"And so," asked Paul Pry, "you think she'd like to get me out of the way?"

"Sure she would. What was in the letter?"

"I don't know."

Mugs Magoo sat bolt upright in his chair and stared with protruding, glassy eyes at Paul Pry.

"You mean to say that you don't know what's in the letter?"

"No. I haven't the faintest idea."

"Well, what the devil did you take the letter for?"

"To read, of course."

"Well, why didn't you read it?"

"I put it down in my shoe and haven't had a chance," said Paul Pry.

Casually, as if the matter were of minor importance, he took the envelope from his shoe, opened his penknife with great deliberation, and slit the envelope along the side. He shook out a folded piece of paper.

"What's it say?" asked Mugs Magoo eagerly.

Paul Pry frowned.

"Rather a puzzling message, I should say, Mugs."

"Well, what is it?"

Paul Pry read the letter out loud—"Tell Stella there's a screw loose, it's Bunny's nutcracker and to make the play but spring me before you flash the take."

"Is that all of it?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"That's all of it," said Paul Pry.

"Well," said Mugs, "we know now why Stella was sticking around that lawyer. Frank Bostwick would never have known what that meant."

"Do you know?" asked Paul Pry.

"Well," said Mugs Magoo, regarding the diminishing level of amber fluid in the whiskey bottle with a mournful expression, "there's some things about it I don't understand. Bunny must be Bunny Myers and when Tompkins says to spring him before flashing the take, it means that he's to actually be out of jail before they exhibit the diamond or turn it over to the insurance company."

"Do you suppose that means that there's something phony about the diamond?" asked Paul Pry.

Mugs said: "Tompkins wouldn't dare to deliver a phony gem to the insurance company. But he's just playing cautious. Lots of times the insurance companies make promises about what they'll do with the district attorney if the crook will come through and tell the hiding place of the gem. Then, when it comes to a showdown, and the insurance company is in the clear, they lose all interest in the matter and the crook gets about twice as stiff a jolt as he would otherwise have drawn."

"Tell me some more about Bunny Myers," said Paul Pry.

"He's an undersized guy with mild eyes and a big nose and

rabbit teeth. They stick out in front and make you feel like feeding him a carrot whenever you see him. I haven't run across Bunny for four or five years; but I know that he used to run around with Tompkins on some of the gem stuff.

"Bunny is a good man to have along because he's so harmless. He looks like a regular rabbit and damned if he don't act like one."

"Any great amount of ability?" asked Paul Pry.

"Yes, he's pretty fast with his noodle," Mugs Magoo admitted, "and he's a pretty good actor. He's cultivated that manner of meekness because nobody ever expects a stick-up artist to have such a meek appearance."

"Well," said Paul Pry, "there's no use bothering my head about it. The message is in some sort of code and it doesn't seem to help us very much. I've got to get my beauty sleep, because I've got a hard night ahead of me tomorrow night."

"Pulling a job tomorrow night?" asked Mugs Magoo, showing interest.

"No," said Paul Pry, "I'm going out to a ball tomorrow night."

"What sort of a ball?" Mugs Magoo inquired.

"A ball that Slick Stella Molay wants me to go to with her," said Paul Pry. "She's going to arrange for an invitation. I'm going in rather a unique costume. She's worked it all out for me, Mugs. It's rather novel. I'm going as a conventional burglar, dressed in a mask and carrying a gun and kit of burglar tools."

Mugs Magoo whirled around and the whiskey bottle, struck by his shoulder, toppled for a moment and crashed to the floor.

"You're what?" he yelled.

"Don't shout," said Paul Pry. "I'm merely going to a masquerade ball with Slick Stella Molay, dressed as a burglar."

Mugs Magoo shook his head dolefully. His hand went to his forehead, as though trying to hold his brain to some semblance of sanity by physical pressure.

"Oh, my God!" he groaned.

"And, by the way," said Paul Pry, "undoubtedly, you're correct in your assumption that Stella knows I picked up the letter Tom Meek left for the lawyer. They'll try to get another one smuggled out of the jail. How long will it take them?"

Mugs Magoo shook his head lugubriously from side to side.

"As far as that's concerned," he said, "it'll probably take them

a couple of days. They've got to smuggle a message in to Tompkins and then Tompkins has got to get another letter to Meek and have it delivered. But you don't need to worry about it, guy. You won't be here when it happens. You'll be lying flat on your back with a lily in your hand. You were a good pal while you lasted but you're like the pitcher that went to the well too often.

"I don't want to intrude on your private affairs, but if you'd let me know the songs that you like best, I'll see that the undertaker gives you the breaks when it comes to the music."

4

Bunny's Nutcracker

The cab driver swung in behind the line of cars that crawled along close to the curb and Slick Stella Molay said: "This is the place."

Within a few seconds Paul Pry was handing Stella out from the taxicab and receiving her gracious smile.

"Darling," she said, "you look splendid. You make my heart go pitty-pat. You look exactly like a burglar."

Paul Pry accepted the compliment and paid off the taxi driver.

"I'll say he looks like a burglar," said the taxi driver, pocketing the money. "It was all I could do to keep from shelling out instead of handing him the meter slip. You see, lady, I was stuck up a week ago and my stomach still feels cold where the gun was pointed."

"And, so this," said Paul Pry, "is the lair of the famous Silver Dawson?"

"Yes," she said. "He's the blackmail king of the underworld. He's a fighter. I wish someone would kill him."

"Will I meet him," asked Paul Pry, "as we go in?"

"No," she said. "Simply show your invitation to the man at the

door and then we'll go in and mingle with the crowd for a minute, have a drink of punch and perhaps a dance. After that you go upstairs. The study is the room on the front of the house on the second floor and the papers are there in the desk. I've given you the key."

"Then what?" asked Paul Pry.

"Then," she said, "we mingle around with the crowd a little longer and then go back to the apartment."

"Without unmasking?" asked Paul Pry.

"Without unmasking," she said. "I would have to unmask if you did, and if Silver Dawson saw me here he'd know right away something was wrong and that our invitations had been forged."

"And if I should meet any of the servants?" asked Paul Pry.

"Then," she said, "go ahead and stick a gun in their ribs. Tie them and gag them if you have to, or knock them out. You don't need to worry, because if anybody should touch you, you could claim that you were looking for the restroom."

She turned and flashed him a dazzling look from her wide blue eyes, a smile from her sensuous, parted lips.

"You see," she said, "everybody would know that you had attended the masquerade in this costume so it would be all right."

Paul Pry nodded. "All right," he said, "let's go."

They walked into the house, surrendered their forged invitations to a doorman and mingled with the crowd. A dozen or more couples were already hilarious from the effects of a remarkably strong punch which was being dished out in quantities by an urbane individual in evening clothes, who had a napkin hanging over his left forearm.

Paul Pry escorted Stella to the punch bowl and, after the second drink of punch, she whirled him out to the floor as the orchestra struck up a dance.

She held herself close to him and whispered words of soft endearment in his ear as they moved lightly across the floor.

"Darling," she said, "you'd be surprised at how grateful I'm going to be."

"Yes?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "The prerogatives of a long friendship, you know."

Paul Pry missed a step and suddenly tightened his arms about the willowy figure in order to let her understand his appreciation.

"I think," she cooed, leaning toward him so that her lips were close to his, "we had better swing over toward this darkest corner by the door. That door leads to the hallway and you go up the stairs and into the front room. I think Silver Dawson is the man dressed in the red devil suit over there by the punch bowl. I'm quite certain there won't be anyone on the upper floor. I've kept my eyes open, getting the servants spotted, and I'm sure they're all downstairs."

"You seem to know the house quite well," said Paul Pry.

"Yes," she said, "I have been here several times before. Sometimes as a guest and more recently as a suppliant, offering anything to get the letters back."

"Anything?" asked Paul Pry.

"Almost anything," she said softly.

The music stopped. Stella pressed her form close to Paul Pry's for one tantalizing moment, then breathed softly: "Hurry, dear, and then we can leave."

Paul Pry nodded and slipped unostentatiously through the doorway into the dark hall.

There were no servants in sight. A flight of stairs led to the upper corridor and Paul Pry took them on swiftly silent feet, moving with a light grace and catlike speed.

But Paul Pry did not turn to the left and go toward the front of the house. Instead he flattened himself against a door which opened upon the corridor near the head of the stairs, and listened carefully.

After a second or two he dropped to his hands and knees and tried the knob of the door.

The door swung inward and Paul Pry, lying prone on the floor, where he would be clear of the line of fire in the event anyone should have been standing in the doorway, peered into the dark interior of the room.

There was no sound or motion. The room was a bedroom and the light which filtered in from the hallway showed a walnut bed, a dressing table and bureau.

There was a ribbon of light which seeped through from the bottom of a door at the other end of the room.

Paul Pry got to his feet, moved swiftly and silently, stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Then he walked

purposefully toward the door where he could see the ribbon of light.

He was more confident as he tried the knob of this door, but equally careful to make no sound. He leaned his weight against the door so as to remove any tension from the latch, turned the knob very slowly to eliminate any possibility of noise. When the catch was free, he pulled the door toward him a bit at a time.

The door opened and Paul Pry, peering through, saw that he was looking into a bathroom, sumptuously appointed. At the other side of the bathroom was a door paneled with a full-length mirror.

Paul Pry stepped into the bathroom and turned out the light by the simple expedient of unscrewing the globe a half turn. Then he devoted his attention to the knob of the opposite doorway.

That knob slowly turned till the catch was free and Paul Pry opened the door an inch at a time.

The bathroom was now dark, so that there was no light behind him to pour into the room as the door was opened.

This door opened into the study which Stella had pointed out to him as being at the front of the house, and the place where the desk was located that contained the precious letters.

A floor lamp was arranged with the shade tilted so that the rays of light were directed full against a door, which Paul Pry surmised must be the door into the corridor and through which he had been supposed to make his entrance.

Standing in the shadows, back of that light, his eyes cold and grim, a heavy automatic held in his right hand, was an undersized man with a sloping forehead, a large nose and rabbit teeth that showed through his half-parted lips.

Noiselessly Paul Pry swung the door open and stepped into the room upon catlike feet.

He had made three steps before some slight noise or perhaps some intuition warned the man with the gun. He whirled with an exclamation of surprise and raised the weapon.

Paul Pry swung swiftly with his right fist. At the same time he leaped forward.

There was the sound of the hissing exclamation of surprise which came from the man with the gun, the noise of swiftly

shuffling feet, the impact of a fist on flesh and then a half groan as the man with the rabbit teeth sank to the carpeted floor.

Paul Pry pocketed the gun. "Make a sound," he said, "and I'll slit your throat."

But the man on the floor was limp and unconscious.

Paul Pry moved swiftly. A handkerchief was thrust into the man's mouth, a bit of strong cord from his pocket looped around the man's wrist and bit into the flesh. Then Paul Pry's hands darted swiftly and purposefully through the man's clothing.

He found a roll of bills, a penknife, cigarette lighter, cigarette case, a handkerchief, fountain pen, some small change, a leather key container well filled with keys, and a blackjack.

The blackjack, hung from a light cord under the left armpit, was worn and shiny from much carrying. It had a conventional leather thong looped around the handle so that it could circle a man's wrist in time of necessity.

Paul Pry jerked the slungshot free and put it in his pocket. He also pocketed the roll of currency. Then he arose, took the keys and moved swiftly about the room, opening locked drawers and the cover of a roll-top desk.

It was at the back of a drawer of the desk that Paul Pry found a packet of letters tied with ribbon. He unfastened the ribbon and glanced swiftly at some of the letters.

The cursory examination showed that they were letters in a feminine handwriting, addressed to "Dearest Bunny" and signed "your own, Stella" in some instances, and "your darling red-hot mamma, Stella" in others.

Paul Pry slipped the letters into his pocket, gave a last swift glance at the figure on the floor and stepped into the bathroom. He walked across the bathroom, through the darkened bedroom, out into the corridor and down the stairs.

Stella Molay was standing in the hallway at the foot of the stairs. Her head was cocked slightly to one side, after the manner of one who is listening, momentarily expecting some noise to crash out on the stillness of the night. A noise which can well be followed by a feminine scream.

As Paul Pry crept lithely down the stairs she stared at him with wide incredulous eyes.

"Good God!" she said. "What's happened!"

Paul Pry walked across to her and made a low bow. "Congratulations, dear," he said. "Your honor is safe."

He straightened to stare into the incredulous dismay of the wide blue eyes.

"Where's Bunny?" she asked.

"Bunny?" he said.

"I mean Silver. Silver Dawson," she corrected herself hastily. "A short man with funny teeth and a big nose."

"Oh," said Paul Pry, "he's in the ballroom. Don't you remember? The man in the devil suit standing over by the punch bowl."

She looked at him with a sudden glint of suspicion in the blue eyes, but Paul Pry returned her stare with a look of childlike candor.

"Well," he said, "let's get out of here and go to the apartment."

"Look here," she said suspiciously, "there's something wrong. You must have got the wrong letters."

"What makes you think so?"

She bit her lip and then said slowly: "Just a hunch, that's all."

Paul Pry gently took her arm. "I'm quite sure it's all right," he said. "I've got the letters."

She paused for a moment as though trying to think up some excuse and then reluctantly accompanied him through the door, across the porch, and down to the line of cars where Paul Pry summoned a cab that was waiting on the off chance of picking up a bit of business.

Once within the taxicab, Paul Pry switched on the dome light and took the letters from his pocket.

"You must be sure you've got the right letters," she said. "Otherwise, you'll have to go back. The letters that I wrote were—quite indiscreet."

"Well," said Paul Pry, pulling one of the letters from the envelope, "let's see if this is indiscreet enough."

He unfolded the letter while she leaned toward him to stare over his shoulder.

As her eyes saw the writing, she gave a gasp. "The damn fool," she said, "to have saved those!"

Paul Pry, apparently heedless of the remark, read a line aloud

and then broke into a chuckle. "Certainly," he said, "that's indiscreet enough for you."

She snatched the letter from his hand, stared at him with blazing eyes.

"Come, sweetheart," he said, "and give me another of those prerogatives of friendship."

Mugs Magoo stood up as Paul Pry entered the room and gave a dramatic imitation of one who is seeing a ghost.

He swung his arm across his eyes.

"Go away!" he shouted. "Go away! Don't hurt me! I was good to him in his lifetime! His ghost can't haunt me! Get away, I say!"

Paul Pry dropped into a chair without bothering to remove either his topcoat or his hat. He lit a cigarette and thrust it in his smiling lips at a jaunty angle.

"What's the matter, Mugs?" he asked.

"My God," said Mugs, "it talks! A ghost that talks! I know it can't be you, because you're dead! You were killed tonight, but how is it that your ghost doesn't have any bullet holes in its body? And it's the first time in my life I ever saw a ghost smoke a cigarette!"

Paul Pry laughed and his hand, dropping to his trouser pocket, brought out a roll of bills. Carelessly, he tossed them to the table.

Mugs stared at the roll. "How much?" he asked.

"Oh, five or six thousand," said Paul Pry carelessly.

"What!" Mugs exclaimed.

Paul Pry nodded.

"Where did it come from?"

"Well," said Paul Pry, "part of it was a donation that was made to me by Bunny Myers. It was an involuntary donation and Bunny will probably not recall it when he wakes up, but it was a donation, nevertheless."

"And the rest?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Do you know, Mugs," he said, "I got the idea that possibly Tompkins didn't trust even his own gang. He had concealed the gem where no one knew where it was. That was a funny crack he made in the note about Bunny's nutcracker. So when Bunny

Myers was making his involuntary donation to me, I examined the slungshot that he carried under his arm.

"Sure enough, there was a screw loose in it. Rather the whole handle could be unscrewed, by exerting proper pressure. Evidently, it was a slungshot that Tompkins had given to Bunny and one he intended to use in a pinch as a receptacle for something that was too hot for him to handle.

"When I unscrewed it, I found the Legget diamond, and a very affable gentleman by the name of Mr. Edgar Patten, an adjuster for the insurance company that handled the insurance on the gem, was good enough to insist that I take a slight reward for my services when I returned the stone to him."

Mugs Magoo pursed his lips and gave a low whistle. "Just a fool for luck!" he exclaimed. "You sure picked two of the toughest nuts in the game, and you're still alive! It ain't right!"

Paul Pry chuckled softly. "Tough nuts to crack all right, Mugs," he mused, "but, with the aid of Bunny's nutcracker, I managed all right."

The Cross-Stitch Killer

Millionaires were that hunter's only game, and when he'd bagged them he sewed their lips up tight for he knew that even dead men sometimes talk. But Paul Pry, professional opportunist, was a tailor of sorts himself, with a needle as sharp and deadly as the cross-stitch killer's—an avenging sword cane to darn living flesh!

1

Murdered Millions

Paul Pry polished the razor-keen blade of his sword cane with the same attentive care a stone polisher might take in putting just the right lustre upon a fine piece of onyx.

"Mugs" Magoo sat slumped in a big overstuffed chair in the corner. He held a whiskey glass in his left hand. His right arm was off at the shoulder.

Eva Bentley sat in a small, glass-enclosed booth and listened to a radio which was tuned in on the wave length of the police broadcasting station. From time to time she took swift notes in competent shorthand, occasionally rattled out a few paragraphs on a portable typewriter which was on a desk at her elbow.

Mugs Magoo rolled his glassy eyes in the direction of Paul Pry. "Some day," he said, "some crook is going to grab the blade of that sword cane and bust it in two. Why don't you pack a big gun and forget that sword cane business? The blade ain't big enough to cut off a plug of chewing tobacco."

Paul Pry smiled. "The efficacy of this sword cane, Mugs, lies in its lightness and speed. It's like a clever boxer who flashes in,

lands a telling blow, and jumps out again before a heavier adversary can even get set to deliver a punch."

Mugs Magoo nodded his head slowly and lugubriously. "Now," he said, "I know why you like that weapon—that's the way you like to play game, jumping in ahead of the police, side-stepping the crooks, ducking out before anyone knows what's happened, and leaving a hell of a mess behind."

Paul Pry's smile broadened into a grin, and the grin became a chuckle. "Well, Mugs," he said, "there's just a chance there may be something in that."

At that moment, Eva Bentley jumped to her feet, picked up her shorthand notebook and opened the door of the glass-enclosed compartment. Instantly, the sound of the police radio became audible.

"What is it, Eva?" asked Paul Pry. "Something important?"

"Yes," she said, "there's just been another corpse found, with his lips sewed together. Like the other one, he's a millionaire—Charles B. Darwin is the victim this time. His murder is almost identical with that of the murder of Harry Travers. Both men were stabbed to death; both men had been receiving threatening letters through the mail; both men were found dead, with their lips sewed together with a peculiar cross-stitch."

Mugs Magoo poured himself a glass of whiskey. "Thank God I ain't no millionaire!" he said.

Paul Pry finished polishing the blade of the sword cane, and inserted it in the cunningly disguised scabbard. His eyes were level-lidded in concentration, and his voice was quick and sharp.

"I presume the police are making quite a commotion about it," he said.

"I'll say they are," Eva Bentley told him. "They've broadcast a general alarm telling all cars to drop everything and concentrate on finding this mysterious murderer. It seems to be a question of money. In fact, the police are certain of it. Evidently they have some information which has not been given to the press. However, it's common knowledge that both men received letters demanding that they place a certain sum of money in an envelope and mail it to a certain person at a certain address. Both men disregarded the request and turned the letter over to the police."

"Any information about any other men who have received similar letters?" asked Paul Pry.

"None. The police are simply giving instructions to the cars. They're assigning cars to the district in which the body was found."

"Where was it—in a house."

"No, it was found in an automobile. The man had evidently been driving an automobile and had pulled in to the curb and stopped. He was killed seated at the wheel. The officers place the death as having taken place at about three o'clock this morning. They are inclined to believe there was some woman companion in the automobile with him, and they're trying to find her. They think that she knows something of the crime, or can at least give some clue to the murderer.

"Anything else?" asked Paul Pry.

"That's about all of it," she said. "You don't want the detailed instructions which are being given the automobiles, do you?"

"No," he told her, "not now. But make notes of everything that goes over the radio in connection with this crime."

She returned to the booth, where she closed the door and once more started her pencil flying over the pages of the shorthand notebook.

Paul Pry turned to Mugs Magoo. His face was fixed in an expression of keen concentration. "All right, Mugs," he said, "snap out of it and tell me what you know about the millionaires."

Mugs Magoo groaned. "Ain't it enough for me to know about the crooks?" he asked, "without having to spill all the dope on the millionaires?"

Paul Pry laughed. "I know what you're trying to do, Mugs," he said. "You're trying to keep me from taking an interest in this case because you're afraid of it. But I'm going to take an interest in it just the same."

Mugs Magoo tilted the bottle of whiskey over the tumbler, drained the last drop from the tumbler, smacked his lips, then turned his glassy eyes toward Paul Pry.

Those were remarkable eyes. They protruded slightly and seemed dead and expressionless, as though covered with some

thin, white film. But they were eyes that saw much and forgot nothing.

Mugs Magoo could give the name, antecedents, connection and criminal record of almost every known crook in the United States. Moreover, he had but to look at a face once in order to remember that man indefinitely. All gossip, all information which ever reached his ears; all occurrences which took place within the range of his vision, remained indelibly impressed upon his memory.

At one time he had been camera-eye man for the metropolitan police. A political shake-up had thrown him out of work, and an unfortunate accident had taken off his right arm at the shoulder. Feeling that he could never return to the police force he had indulged his desire for liquor, until, when Paul Pry found the man, he had been but a sodden wreck, begging a mere pittance as a cripple, by selling pencils on a street corner. Paul Pry had cultivated the man, gradually learned something of his history and the remarkable gift which had made him so valuable to the police. He had given him food, clothes, money, and an allowance of whiskey, which served to satisfy the keen craving of the man's insatiable appetite. From time to time, he used such information as Mugs Magoo could impart by drawing upon his encyclopedic knowledge of the underworld.

"Mugs," said Paul Pry, "what do you know about Charles Darwin?"

Mugs Magoo shook his head. "Keep out of it, chief," he said. "Please keep out of it. You're mixing with dynamite. This isn't the sort of a case where you're up against some cheap crook; you're dealing with a homicidal maniac here."

Paul Pry waited for a moment, then said again with slow emphasis: "Mugs, what do you know about Charles Darwin?"

Mugs Magoo sighed. "To begin with, he's a millionaire who made his money out of the stock market when the stock market was going up, and didn't lose his money when the stock market went down. That means that he's got brains or is lucky."

"He married one of those cold-blooded society-type women, and the marriage didn't take. He got to playing around. Mrs. Darwin never played in her life; she didn't know what play was. Life was a serious proposition with her, a question of just who

she should invite to the next tea, and what sort of a bid she should make when she picked up her bridge hand.

"Darwin wanted a divorce. She wouldn't give him one. She hired detectives to trail him around, so that she could get enough on him so that he couldn't get one. He could never get anything on her, because there was never anything to get."

"How do you know all this, Mugs?" asked Paul Pry curiously.

Mugs Magoo regarded the empty whiskey glass with a speculative eye. "Those glasses," he said, "don't hold as much as the others; they—"

"Never mind the glasses, Mugs. How did you find out all this about a millionaire's matrimonial mix-up?"

"Oh," said Mugs wearily, "the detective that Mrs. Darwin got hold of was an ex-con. I spotted him, and he was afraid I was going to turn him in, so he spilled the beans to me about what he was doing."

"Well," said Paul Pry, "you're still not telling me what happened."

"Well," Mugs Magoo said, "he was a clever bird. He wasn't like the ordinary private detective. Naturally he wasn't, because he'd been a high-class crook in his time, and he knew a lot of angles that only a crook would know. As a result, he got quite a bit of stuff on Darwin. He found out where Darwin was keeping a love nest."

"A love nest?" asked Paul Pry.

"Well, that's what the tabloids call it," Mugs Magoo said. "It was just an apartment he kept without letting his wife know about it."

"But his wife found out about it?" asked Pry.

"Not this one," Mugs said. "The detective found out about it, but he was too wise to report the information to the agency. He realized that all he'd draw from the agency would be eight dollars a day, perhaps a bonus of a suit of clothes, or something. So he went to Darwin, put the cards on the table, told Darwin what he had, and offered to sell out for five thousand dollars. Naturally, he got the five grand."

"And what did he tell the agency?" asked Paul Pry.

"Oh, he told the agency enough to let them make a pretty good report to Mrs. Darwin. As a matter of fact, I think he fixed it up

with Charles Darwin so that the report was sufficiently complete to give Mrs. Darwin most of the evidence she wanted."

Paul Pry squinted his forehead thoughtfully. "Where was this love nest, Mugs?" he asked.

Mugs was pouring whiskey into the glass. Abruptly, he stopped and straightened. His eyes blinked thoughtfully. "Hell!" he said. "I've got the address of the place somewhere in my mind, but—by gosh!—it was out in the west end somewhere. Ain't that a break?"

Paul Pry reached for his hat and coat. "All right, Mugs," he said, "pull the address out of the back of your mind, because I want it."

2

Paul Pry Turns Peeping Tom

The apartment house had that subtle air of quiet exclusiveness which is associated with high prices, but not necessarily with respectability.

Paul Pry moved down the deeply carpeted corridor like some silent shadow. He paused in front of the door and inspected the lock. Then he selected a key from a well-filled key ring, inserted the key and exerted a slow, steady pressure. A moment later there was a click as the lock slipped back.

Paul Pry moved on through the door, into the apartment, and closed the door behind him.

He had, he observed with satisfaction, reached the place ahead of the police. Doubtless, the police would, sooner or later, find out about this expensive apartment which was maintained by the millionaire play-boy who had figured so grimly in such a blood-curdling murder. Right at present, however, Paul Pry was on the job, and in the position of one who is one jump ahead.

Paul Pry did not switch on the lights, but used an electric flashlight. He sent the beam darting about the apartment. He saw

that the windows were covered by expensive drapes; that, in addition to the drapes, there were shades which were drawn down, making it virtually impossible for the faintest flicker of light to be seen from the street. There were expensive carpets, deep overstuffed chairs, a well-filled bookcase which seemed, however, more to furnish background than a source of reading material. There was a bedroom with a beautiful walnut bed, a tiled bathroom with the spaciousness which indicated high rental. There was a second bedroom which opened on the other side of the bath. There was a kitchen and dining room which opened off the room which Paul Pry entered.

Paul Pry moved through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Then he walked back to the bedroom, turned the flashlight into the closet.

The closet was well filled with clothes of expensive texture. They were feminine garments, and it needed no price tag to show either their quality or their high initial cost.

Paul Pry looked in the bureau drawers and found filmy silk underthings, expensive hose, silk lounging pajamas. He left the bureau and entered the other room. Here he found a closet well crammed with masculine garments. There was a writing desk in this room, and a checkbook in a pigeon hole of the writing desk. Paul Pry took out the checkbook and looked at the stubs.

The stubs were virtually all in a feminine handwriting. They ran to an alarming total.

He was putting the checkbook back in its compartment, when his eye caught a letter with a special-delivery stamp on it. The letter was addressed to Gertrude Fenwick and the address was that of the apartment house. It had been very neatly typewritten and there was no return address on the envelope.

Paul shamelessly inserted his fingers under the flap of the envelope, took out a sheet of typewritten paper and proceeded to read:

> My Dear Miss Fenwick:
>
> I dislike very much to involve you in this matter, but I am addressing this communication to you in order that it may reach the eyes of Mr. Charles B. Darwin.

I feel that when Mr. Darwin realizes that even the carefully guarded secret of this apartment is known to the undersigned, he may, perhaps, be more inclined to give heed to my requests.

My last request was turned over to the police, despite the fact that I warned him that such a course would be disastrous. I am now giving him one last chance.

If he will make a check, payable to bearer, to an amount of twenty-five thousand dollars, address it to Fremont Burke, at General Delivery, and make certain that no attempt is made to follow the person who is to receive that letter and cash the check, and in no way seek to trace such a person by marked money or otherwise, and if he will further use his influence to notify his friend, Mr. Perry C. Hammond, that he is making such a remittance, and that he feels it would be well for Mr. Hammond to make such a remittance, then he will be unmolested. The secret of this apartment will remain a secret and he need fear no physical violence from the undersigned.

If, on the other hand, he continues in his course of obstinate refusal to comply with my wishes, if he continues to unite with Mr. Hammond in employing private investigators to seek to learn my identity, his fate and that of Mr. Hammond will be the fate of Mr. Harry Travers.

Very truly yours,

XXXX

The letter was unsigned, except for the diagram of several interlocking "x's" which formed a rude diagram of a cross-stitch, similar to the stitch which had been placed across the lips of the dead body of Harry Travers, and, later, across those of Charles B. Darwin.

Paul Pry whistled softly when he had read the letter, folded it and thrust it in his pocket. He had directed the beam of the flashlight once more upon the desk, when his ears caught the metallic click of a key being inserted in the lock of the door which led to the corridor.

Paul Pry switched out the flashlight and stood motionless.

He heard the sound of the door open, then closing, and the noise made by the spring lock as it snapped into place. Then he heard the rustle of garments, and the click of a light switch.

Paul Pry slipped the sword cane down from the place where he had it clamped under his arm and moved on furtive feet, stepping noiselessly upon the tiled floor of the bathroom, to where he could look into the bedroom.

There was no one in the bedroom, but a mirror showed him the reflection of the person who had entered the apartment.

She was perhaps twenty-six years of age, slender, well-formed, gray-eyed, blonde, and exceedingly nervous. She had carried two suitcases into the apartment, and the suitcases now reposed on the carpet near her feet, one on either side.

For a moment, Paul Pry saw her reflection in the mirror clearly. Then she moved out of his range of vision, and he suddenly realized she was coming directly toward the bathroom.

He flattened himself in the shadows just back of the door and waited.

The light switch clicked in the bedroom. There was the sound of swift surreptitious movement.

Paul Pry waited for more than a minute. Then, curiosity getting the better of discretion, he peered round the edge of the door.

The young woman had divested herself of her outer garments, and stood attired in filmy underthings, looking at herself in the mirror. As Paul Pry watched, she picked up a dress from the bed, slipped it on, and surveyed the effect.

She nodded to herself with evident approval at what she saw in the mirror, then pulled the dress off over her head.

The dress which she had worn when she entered the apartment, a gray affair which displayed to advantage the curves of her willowy figure, lay upon the bed. Paul Pry waited for her to put it on. Instead, however, she took lingerie from the drawer of the bureau, held it against the satin smoothness of her skin and once more surveyed the reflection with critical inspection.

At length, she picked up the gray dress, slipped it over her head, adjusted it in front of the mirror, then walked rapidly to the living room, where she picked up the suitcases and carried them

into the bedroom. She laid the suitcases on the bed, opened them and started folding the garments into them.

Paul Pry, watching from his place of concealment, saw that the suitcases had been empty when she took them into the room; that she carefully folded the gowns, packing the cases as tightly as possible; that she also put in the elaborately embroidered silk lingerie which she had taken from the bureau drawer.

When both cases had been packed to the point of bursting with the most modish of gowns, the most expensive selection of underthings and accessories, the young woman struggled with the straps, trying to get the suitcases closed.

It was at that moment that Paul Pry, his sword cane held under his arm, his hat in his hand, stepped into the bedroom.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

She gave a sudden scream, jumped back from the bed and stared at him with wide, startled eyes.

Paul Pry bowed courteously. "I happened," he explained, "to be in the bathroom. I couldn't help watching you. Perhaps it is a 'Peeping Tom' complex that I have. I didn't know I possessed it until just this moment, but you were beautiful, and I was curious. Need more be said?"

She was white to the lips. She stared at him wordlessly.

"But," Paul Pry went on, "having been permitted to invade the privacy of milady's boudoir, I recognized the obligations which are incident to the benefits. Apparently you need someone to assist you in closing the suitcases. May I offer my services?"

Words came chokingly from her lips.

"Who . . . who . . . who are you, and what do you want?"

"The name," he said, "really doesn't matter, I assure you. It doesn't matter in the slightest. When people get acquainted under such charmingly informal circumstances, I think names have but little to do with it. Suppose, therefore, that I shall call you Gertrude, and you call me Paul?"

"But," she said with swift alarm, "my name is not Gertrude."

"No?" he asked.

"No," she said. "My name is—"

"Yes, yes," he told her, "go on. Only the first name, if you please. I am not interested in last names."

"The name," she said, "is Thelma."

"A remarkably pretty name," he told her. "And may I ask, Thelma, what are you doing in this apartment?"

"I was getting some clothes," she said.

"Your clothes?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Then," he said, "you must be aware of the untimely death of the person who is maintaining this establishment."

"No! No!" she said. "I don't know anything about that. In fact, I don't know anything about the place at all."

"You just left your clothes here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'd just moved in. You see, I subleased the apartment."

"From whom?" he inquired.

"From an agent," she said.

He laughed. "Come, come," he said, "you'll have to do better than that. Let's be frank with each other. This apartment was maintained by Charles B. Darwin. Darwin recently met a very violent end. You have doubtless heard of the death of Harry Travers. The circumstances surrounding the death of Darwin were almost identical. The lips, if I may be pardoned for speaking of such a gruesome matter, were sewed tightly shut with a peculiar cross-stitch. Now, it is quite apparent that a person who sews lips of a man, does so with some motive. Were the man living, that motive might well be to insure temporary silence. But there are much better and less painful methods of insuring silence. To sew the lips of a dead man had nothing whatever to do with the powers of speech. One would judge, therefore, that the sewing of the lips was either by way of warning to others, or as a gesture, to make the murder seem the more gruesome. It might also well be a warning to others who had been approached along certain lines not to communicate the facts to the police."

She swayed slightly.

"You're faint?" he asked. "Do sit down in one of these chairs."

She shook her head in tense silence. "No," she said, "I'm all right. I'm going to tell you the truth."

"I wish you would, Thelma," he said.

"I'm a model," she said, "in a dressmaking establishment. I know the lady by sight who accompanied Mr. Darwin when these

dresses were purchased. I happened to meet her on the street just an hour or so ago. She told me that owing to circumstances over which she had no control, she was leaving the city at once; that she had left a very fine wardrobe here, and that she knew the dresses would fit me, because we were almost identical in size. She gave me a key to the apartment, and told me to come up and take whatever I wanted."

"Why didn't you bring a trunk?" asked Paul Pry.

"Because," she said, "I didn't want too many clothes; I just wanted some of the pretty things that would give me a break."

"And she gave you her key to the apartment."

"Yes."

"Is it at all possible," Paul Pry inquired, "that you are, perhaps, drawing upon your imagination?"

She shook her head.

"And you're not the young woman who occupied this apartment?"

"You should be able to figure that one out for yourself," she said. "You stood there and watched me trying on the things." She lowered her eyes.

"Are you, perhaps," asked Paul Pry, "trying to blush?"

Her eyes flashed with swift emotion. "You should be ashamed of yourself," she said, "standing there and watching a woman dress that way!"

Paul Pry bowed his head humbly. "Please accept my most profound apologies," he said. "And would you, perhaps, let me see the key with which you entered the apartment?"

She inserted her fingers into a small pocket in her dress, took out a key, started to hand it to him, then stopped suddenly.

Paul Pry's eyes were hard and insistent. "The key," he said.

"I don't know who you are," she said, "and I don't know what right you've got to ask for the key."

Paul Pry moved toward her. His eyes were cold and hypnotic. "The key," he repeated.

She stared into his eyes for several seconds, then slowly opened her hand.

The key dropped to the carpet.

Paul Pry stooped to pick it up.

At the moment she moved with swift speed. Paul Pry swung

himself to one side and dodged as a small, pearl-handled automatic glittered in her hand. "Stick them up!" she said savagely.

Paul Pry lunged forward, caught her about the knees. She gave a half scream and fell forward, the gun dropping from her hand. They came together on the floor, a tangled mass of arms and legs, from which Paul Pry emerged presently, smiling and debonair.

"Naughty, naughty," he said. "I really should spank you for that."

He took the automatic and slipped it into his hip pocket. Then, as the young woman sat on the floor arranging her clothes so as to cover her legs, Paul Pry searched until he found the key, held it up and smiled knowingly.

"I thought so," he said. "A skeleton key."

She stared at him wordlessly.

"You are," said Paul Pry, "in the eyes of the law, a burglar, a person guilty of making a felonious entrance and taking property which does not belong to you."

She said nothing.

"Under the circumstances," said Paul Pry, striding easily across the room, "I think I will have to telephone to the police."

She remained as he had left her—motionless, silent, and with a face which was drained of expression.

Paul Pry approached the door which led into the corridor, turned and smiled. "Upon second thought, however," he said, "in view of the most charming display of feminine pulchritude which you unwittingly gave me, I am going to let mercy temper justice."

With a swift motion of his arms and hands, he flipped back the spring catch on the door, pulled the door open, stepped into the corridor and slammed the door behind him.

There was no sound of pursuit, no commotion. The apartment remained completely silent.

3

The Wooden Fish

Paul Pry was faultlessly attired in evening clothes when he pressed the doorbell of the magnificent residence of Perry C. Hammond.

A dour-visaged butler opened the door. Pry met his sour look with a disarming smile.

"A gentleman," he said, "who refuses to divulge his name, wishes to see Mr. Hammond at once upon a matter of the most urgent nature."

"Mr. Hammond, sir," said the butler, "is not at home."

"You will explain to Mr. Hammond," said Paul Pry, still smiling, "that I am a specialist in my line."

"Mr. Hammond, sir, is not at home."

"Quite right, my man, quite right. And, will you please add to the explanation you make to Mr. Hammond that my particular specialty is in disorders of the lips—disorders which have to do with a permanent silence, brought about through mechanical means."

Paul Pry's smiling eyes locked with those of the butler, and

suddenly the smile left Paul Pry's eyes. His face became cold and stern.

"You will," he said, "convey that message to Mr. Hammond immediately. Otherwise, I will communicate with Mr. Hammond in some other way, and explain to him the reason my message was not delivered personally. I don't mind assuring you that Mr. Hammond will consider you have committed a major indiscretion."

The butler hesitated for a long moment. "Will you step this way, sir?" he asked.

He ushered Paul Pry through a reception hallway, into a small entrance parlor. "Please be seated, sir," he said. "I will see if, perhaps, Mr. Hammond has returned."

The butler glided from the room, and the door had no sooner closed upon him, than Paul Pry, moving with noiseless stealth, jerked open the door and stepped once more into the reception corridor.

His quick eyes had detected a small enameled box for out-going mail, and Paul Pry's deft fingers raised the lid of the box and explored the interior.

There were three letters addressed in a cramped, angular handwriting. Paul Pry flipped the letters, one over the other, in rapid succession, scanning the addresses. The third envelope was addressed to Fremont Burke, General Delivery.

Paul Pry stuck it in his pocket, returned the others to the mail box, and then moved on furtive feet back into the reception parlor.

He had barely resumed his seat when the butler entered through another door. "Mr. Hammond," he said, "will see you."

Paul Pry walked across the room, followed the butler down a passageway and went through a door the servant indicated.

A man with great puffs under his eyes, a look of infinite weariness upon his face, stared at him with expressionless interrogation. "Well," he said, "what was it you wanted?"

"I have reason," said Paul Pry, "to believe that your life is in danger."

"I think you are mistaken," said Hammond.

"I have reason," said Paul Pry, "to believe that the same fate

which overtook Charles C. Darwin may, perhaps, be in store for you."

Perry Hammond shook his head. "Whoever gave you your information," he said, "misinformed you."

"In other words," said Paul Pry slowly, "you deny that you have received any demands from a person who has threatened you with death or disaster in the event you fail to comply? You deny that you have been threatened with death, under circumstances similar to the threats which were made to Mr. Charles Darwin?"

"I," said Perry Hammond, slowly and deliberately, "don't know what you're talking about. I saw you because I thought you might be interested in getting some information about Mr. Darwin. As far as I am concerned, you can get out and stay out."

Paul Pry bowed. "Thank you very much," he said, "for your interview, Mr. Hammond." He turned on his heel.

"Wait a minute," said the millionaire in a cold, husky voice.

"Are you a newspaper reporter?"

"No," said Paul Pry without turning.

"Then who the devil are you?" asked Hammond with sudden irritation.

Paul Pry turned to face the millionaire. "I am a man," he said, smiling affably, "who is going to make you extremely sorry you lied to him."

With that, he turned once more and strode steadily and purposefully down the carpeted corridor.

Mugs Magoo looked up from his whiskey glass as Paul Pry latchkeyed the apartment door. "Well," he said mournfully, "I see you're still with us."

"Temporarily, at least, Mugs," Paul Pry retorted, smiling.

He hung up his hat and coat, crossed to a closet and opened the door. The closet contained a collection of drums, drums of various sorts and descriptions.

Mugs Magoo shuddered. "For God's sake," he said, "don't start that!"

Paul Pry laughed lightly and fingered the drums with the attentive care that a hunter might give to the selection of a gun from a gun cabinet.

Mugs Magoo hastily poured liquor into the glass. "At least,"

he said, "give me fifteen minutes to get liquored before you start. Those damn drums do things to me. They get into my blood and make the pulses pound."

Paul Pry's voice was almost dreamy as he picked out a round piece of wood which seemed to be entirely solid, save for a cut along one end, with two holes bored at the end of the cut.

"That, Mugs," he said, "is the function of drums. We don't know exactly what it is they do, but they seem to get into a person's blood. You don't like the sound of drums, Mugs, because you are afraid of the primitive. You are continually trying to run away from yourself. Doubtless a psycho-analyst could look into your past and find that your taste for whiskey had its inception in an attempt to drown some real or fancied sorrow."

Mugs Magoo let his face show extreme consternation. "You're not going to take me to one of those psycho-analysts?" he asked.

Paul Pry shook his head. "Certainly not, Mugs," he said. "I think it is too late to effect a cure now, and, in the event a cure was effected, Mugs, you would lose your taste for whiskey.

"Drums, Mugs, do to me exactly what whiskey does to you. If you could cultivate a taste for drums, I think I would endeavor to cure you of the whiskey habit. But, since you cannot, the only thing I can do is to let you enjoy your pleasures in your own way, and insist that you allow me an equal latitude."

Paul Pry sat down in the chair which faced the big fireplace, took a long, slender stick, to the end of which had been affixed a rose-bud-shaped bit of hard wood.

"Now, Mugs," he said, "here we have a *Mok Yeitt*, otherwise known as a 'wooden fish.' The wooden fish is a prayer drum used by the Buddhists in China to pave the way for a friendly reception to their prayers. If you will listen, Mugs, you will get the remarkable delicacy of tone which the better specimens of these drums give. They are cunningly carved by hand. A hole is made in either end of the slit, and the wood is hollowed out with painstaking care . . ."

"For God's sake!" said Mugs Magoo, "don't! You're going to drive me crazy with that thing!"

Paul Pry shook his head, started tapping the wooden stick against the bulge of the drum. A throbbing sound filled the

apartment, a sound which had a peculiar wooden resonance which trailed off into vibrating overtones.

Mugs Magoo frantically downed the whiskey, poured himself another drink, gulped it, then shivered and sat motionless. After a moment, he placed his one hand against his ear.

"I can shut out half of the sound, anyhow," he said, at length.

Paul Pry paid no attention to him, but continued tapping upon the drum at regular intervals.

"What's the idea of all the drumming now?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"I'm trying to concentrate," said Paul Pry. "I think I almost have the solution I want."

Abruptly, he ceased drumming and smiled benignly at Mugs. "Yes, Mugs," he said, " I have the solution."

Mugs Magoo shivered. "It'll be another five minutes," he said, "before that whiskey takes effect. I was spared five minutes of torture anyway. What is the solution?"

Paul Pry set down the *Mok Yeitt*. He reached into the inside pocket of his coat, pulled out an envelope, the flap of which had been steamed open, and took out a letter and a tinted oblong of paper.

"Mugs," he said, "I have here a letter bearing the angular signature of Perry C. Hammond, a multi-millionaire. Let me read it to you.

"Mr. Fremont Burke,
General Delivery,
City.

Dear Mr. Burke:

I herewith comply with your request. You will find enclosed my check for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer. I wish to assure you that no attempt whatever will be made to interfere with the cashing of that check. On the other hand, I have notified my bankers by telephone that the check represents the transfer of consideration in a bona fide business deal, and that they are to promptly honor the check when it is presented.

Trusting that this complies in full with your de-

mands and that I may now be at liberty to consider the matter closed, I am,
Very truly yours,
Perry C. Hammond.

Mugs Magoo stared at Paul Pry. "A check," he said, "for twenty-five thousand dollars?"

Paul Pry nodded. "And don't forget, Mugs," he said, "that it's payable to bearer."

"But," said Mugs Magoo, "who is the bearer?"

Paul Pry got to his feet, replaced the wooden fish in the drum closet, closed the door, turned to Mugs and smiled once more. "Mugs," he said, "I am the bearer."

Mugs Magoo stared at him with eyes that seemed to pop from his head. "My God!" he said. "You've been mixing into things again! You're going to have the police after you for theft, Perry Hammond after you for fraud, and probably the man who pulls the cross-stitch murders after you, hammer and tongs, trying to kill you and sew your lips up!"

Paul Pry pursed his lips thoughtfully, then nodded his head.

"Yes, Mugs," he said, "I should say that that is a very fair statement of the probable consequences. In fact, I would say that it is a somewhat conservative estimate."

Smiling, he crossed to the writing desk and pulled down the slab of heavy wood which served as a writing table. He explored the pigeon holes which were disclosed in the back of the desk.

"You will remember, Mugs," he said, "that at one time I secured a long, purple envelope, with a red border. You asked me what the devil I wanted with such an envelope, and I told you that I was keeping it because it was distinctive."

Mugs Magoo nodded. "Yes," he said, "I remember that."

Paul Pry took a fountain pen from his pocket and addressed the purple envelope with the red border.

"Mr. Fremont Burke, General Delivery, City," he said when he had finished writing. "The red ink shows up rather to advantage on that purple background. It makes it quite harmonious."

"What's in the envelope?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"Nothing," said Paul Pry.

"What's going to be in it?"

"Nothing."

"What's the idea?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry smiled. He took from another compartment of the desk a stamped envelope. He addressed that envelope also to Fremont Burke, General Delivery, City.

"What's going in that envelope?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"In this envelope," said Paul Pry, smiling, "is going the best forgery of this check which I can make, and I'm satisfied, Mugs, that it will be quite a clever forgery."

Mugs Magoo stared at Paul Pry in wordless contemplation. Then, "You're going to cash the original check?" he asked.

Paul Pry nodded.

"How about the forged check?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry shrugged his shoulders. "That, Mugs," he said, "is a matter which lies between the bank and the man who presents the check."

"But," said Mugs Magoo, "suppose the forged check should be presented first?"

Paul Pry smiled patronizingly. "Come, come, Mugs," he said, "you must give me credit for a little intelligence. The original check will be cashed before the forged check ever reaches the post office."

"And what," asked Mugs Magoo, "is the idea of the two letters—one in the colored envelope and one in the plain envelope?"

"That, Mugs," said Paul Pry, "comes under that classification of a trade secret. Really, it's something that I can't tell you unless you permit me to do a little more drumming."

Mugs Magoo shook his head violently from side to side in extreme agitation.

"What's the idea of the shake?" asked Paul Pry.

"I wanted to see if the whiskey had taken effect," said Mugs Magoo. "If it had, I'd let you drum some more, but I see that I either didn't get enough whiskey, or else I misjudged the time it would take to make me dizzy. I can't stand the drumming, so you can keep your damned trade secret to yourself."

Paul Pry chuckled and thrust the envelopes into his inside pocket. "Tomorrow at this time, Mugs, I'll be twenty-five

thousand dollars richer. Moreover, I'll be embarked upon an interesting adventure."

"Tomorrow at this time," said Mugs Magoo, with solemn melancholy, "you'll be stretched out on a marble slab, and a coroner and an autopsy surgeon will be staring at the cross-stitches that are placed across your lips."

4

The Second Check

Paul Pry, wearing an overcoat which was turned up around the neck, a felt hat which was pulled down low over his forehead, and with heavily smoked glasses shielding his eyes, shoved the check through the cashier's window.

The cashier stared at Paul Pry's smoked glasses, looked at the check, said, "Just a moment," and stepped from his grilled cage. He consulted a memorandum, looked at the check once more, sighed, and, with obvious reluctance, picked up a sheaf of currency.

"How," he asked, "would you like to have this?"

"In hundreds," said Paul Pry, "if that's convenient."

The cashier counted out hundred dollar bills in lots of ten, stacked them all together and snapped a large elastic band about them.

"You'll take them that way?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You wish to count them?"

"No," said Paul Pry, and turned away.

His long overcoat flapped about his ankles as he walked. He could feel the gaze of the cashier striking between his shoulder blades with almost physical impact.

Paul Pry went at once to the post office, where he dropped the two letters through the slot marked for city mail. Then he went out to lunch, and, after lunch, he strolled back to the post office.

He managed to stand where, without seeming to be too conspicuous, he could watch the window marked "General Delivery—A to G."

Shortly after two-thirty, a young woman, stylishly gowned, presented herself at the window.

Paul Pry, standing some thirty feet away, at the end of a corridor, saw the clerk at the general-delivery window hand out a long envelope of purple tint, with a red border. The young woman took it, looked at it curiously. A moment later, the man behind the grill slid another envelope through the window. The girl took it, stared curiously at both envelopes. A moment later she moved away from the window, paused to open the envelopes, staring with puzzled countenance at the empty interior of the purple envelope.

Evidently she expected the check which was in the second envelope, for, as she removed the slip of paper, a look of relief came over her features. Paul Pry, standing where he could observe her every move, saw that she was laboring under great tension. Her lips seemed inclined to quiver, and her hands shook as she crumpled the purple envelope, held it over the huge iron waste basket as though to drop it. Then, apparently she thought better of it, for she uncrumpled the envelope, folded it and thrust it in her purse.

She walked from the post-office building, down the granite steps to the sidewalk, where a second young woman was waiting in an automobile.

Paul Pry, following behind, yet careful lest he should seem too eager, was unable to get a clear view of the woman who drove the automobile. But he saw the young woman who had taken the letters from the post office jump into the car. The car immediately drove off at high speed.

Paul Pry ran down the post-office steps to the lot where he had left his own automobile parked. He started the motor, then divested himself of the overcoat, the dark glasses, and shifted the

slouch hat for one with a stiffer brim, letting the engine of his car warm up as he was making the changes. Then he stepped into the machine, drove at once to the bank where he had cashed the twenty-five thousand dollar check earlier in the day.

He made no effort to find a legitimate parking place for his car, but left it in front of a fire plug, certain that he would receive a tag, certain, also, that the car would be located in an advantageous position when he wished to use it once more.

He walked through the revolving door, stood in the ornate marble foyer looking at the long corridors with their grilled windows, the desks of executives, the customers crowding about the stand on which counter checks and deposit slips were kept.

Paul Pry went at once to the end of the longest line he could see, stood there fumbling a deposit slip in his fingers.

He had been there less than five seconds when he saw the young woman who had taken the letter from the post office walk with quick, nervous steps to the window of the paying teller. She presented a check and was promptly referred to the cashier. Paul Pry watched her as she thrust the check through the window to the cashier, saw the hand of the cashier as it took the check and turned it over and over while he studied it intently.

A moment later, there was the faint sound of an electric buzzer. A uniformed officer who had been loitering about, watching the patrons idly, suddenly stiffened to attention, looked about him, caught a signal from the cashier. He moved unostentatiously forward.

During all of this time the young woman had stood at the window, apparently entirely oblivious of what was taking place about her.

Paul Pry walked to the telephone booths, dropped a nickel and called the number of Perry C. Hammond.

A moment later, a feminine voice announced that Mr. Hammond's secretary was speaking, and Paul Pry stated that he desired to speak with Mr. Hammond concerning the matter of a twenty-five thousand dollar check which had been issued to Fremont Burke.

Almost at once he heard the sound of whispers, and then Hammond's voice came over the wire, a voice which was dry

with nervousness, despite the millionaire's attempt to make it sound casual.

"How are you this afternoon, Mr. Hammond?" said Paul Pry cordially.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?" asked the millionaire.

"Oh," said Paul Pry casually, "I just wanted to advise you that I had stolen twenty-five thousand dollars from you and that I trusted the loss wouldn't inconvenience you in any way."

"That you had what?" screamed the millionaire.

"Stolen twenty-five thousand dollars from you," Paul Pry remarked. "I don't think that there's any occasion to get excited over it. From all I hear, you can well afford to spare it. But I didn't want you to be embarrassed on account of the theft."

"What are you talking about?" Hammond demanded.

"Merely," said Paul Pry, "that my name happens to be Fremont Burke. I was flat broke and had tried to get five dollars from my brother in Denver. I called at the post office to see if there was any mail for me, and a letter was delivered to me. I opened it and saw there was a check enclosed for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer.

"Naturally, I thought the thing was some sort of a joke, but thought perhaps I might be able to get the price of a meal out of it, so I took it to the bank. To my surprise, they cashed it at once and without question. I realized then, of course, that I had, fortunately, stumbled on a remittance which was intended for someone else. Not wishing to disappoint the someone else, I forged your name to a check, put it in an envelope and mailed it to Fremont Burke, in care of General Delivery."

The millionaire's voice was almost a scream of terror.

"You did what?" he shrieked.

"Come, come," said Paul Pry. "There's no need of so much excitement. I forged your check for twenty-five thousand dollars and put it in the mail. It occurred to me that the person who received that check might have been expecting a legitimate business remittance from you, and would probably put the check through his bank for collection, or might possibly present the check at the cashier's window.

"Under the circumstances, the check would probably be branded as a forgery. I did my best to make the forgery a good

one, but, you understand, even a large bank will look carefully at a second check for twenty-five thousand dollars, payable to bearer, which is presented in the course of one business day.

"It occurs to me, therefore, that if the bank should advise you someone has forged a check and is presenting it for collection, it might be advisable for you to refuse to prosecute that person on the ground of forgery. You see, he might be acting in perfect good faith, and . . ."

There was an inarticulate exclamation at the other end of the line, followed by the slamming of a receiver on the hook. Paul Pry figured that Perry Hammond had cut off the connection in order to rush through a call to the bank.

He strolled from the telephone booth, walked across to a desk, filled out a deposit slip and strolled to the window which was nearest to the cashier's window.

The uniformed officer had moved up and taken the young woman by the arm. She was white-faced and trembling.

"I tell you," Paul Pry heard her say, "I know nothing whatever about it, except that I was hired to get this check out of the mail and cash it. After I had the money I was supposed to call a certain telephone number, and I would then be given instructions as to how I should proceed. That's all I know about it."

The telephone at the cashier's elbow rang sharply and insistently. The cashier picked up the telephone, said, "hello," and then let surprise register on his countenance. After a moment he said: "Yes, Mr. Hammond, late this morning. I remembered particularly that you had left instructions about the matter, and . . ."

The receiver made squawking, metallic noises which were inaudible to Paul Pry's ears, but the face of the cashier flushed with color.

"Just a minute," he said. "I think you're nervous and excited, Mr. Hammond. If you'll just . . ."

He was interrupted by more squawking noises from the receiver.

The line at which Paul Pry had been standing moved up, so that Paul Pry found himself at the window.

"I wish to make a deposit," he said, thrusting the deposit slip

through the window, together with ten of the one-hundred-dollar bills he had received from the bank earlier in the day.

The man at the window was smiling and affable. "You should go down to the fourth window," he said, "the one marked 'Deposits—M to R'."

Paul Pry looked apologetic and embarrassed.

"Just right down there where you see the lettering over the window," said the man, smiling unctuously.

Paul Pry walked slowly past the cashier's window. He was in time to hear the cashier say to the officer: "It's quite all right, Madson. We can't cash this check because the signature is irregular; but Mr. Hammond promises that he will rectify the matter, so far as Mr. Burke is concerned. It seems there's been a very serious mistake, for which the bank is in no way responsible. It's due to the carelessness of a customer in mailing checks payable to bearer . . ."

There was more, which Paul Pry could not hear because it was delivered in a lower voice, a voice which was almost surreptitiously confidential, and because appearances required that Paul Pry should move over toward the window which had been pointed out to him.

He did, however, see the young lady move away from the window, in the direction of the telephone booths. She dropped a coin and called a number. She talked rapidly and excitedly, then paused to listen for several seconds, at the end of which time she nodded her head and hung up the telephone.

Paul Pry followed her from the bank, down to the curb, where he saw the same car which he had seen parked in front of the post office. The young woman got into the car, which at once drove off.

This time, Paul Pry's car was parked where he had no difficulty in getting into an advantageous position directly behind the coupe which he was trailing. He ripped the red police tag from the steering wheel, thrust it in his pocket, and concentrated his attention upon following the car ahead.

It was not a particularly easy task. The young woman in the car ahead was a good driver, and she was evidently going some place in very much of a hurry.

The car stopped, at length, in front of a building which apparently housed a speakeasy. The young woman left the car,

walked across the curb with rapid, nervous steps, rang a bell and stood perfectly still while a panel slid back in the door and a face regarded her.

A moment later, the door opened, and the young woman vanished.

The coupe left the curb, and, as it sped away, the driver turned for one last look at the door where the young woman had been admitted.

Paul Pry started nervously as he saw the face pressed against the glass in the rear window of the coupe. It was the face of the young woman he had met previously in the apartment which Charles B. Darwin had maintained so secretly, the young woman who had been trying on clothes in front of the mirror. However, it was too late then to do anything about it. The coupe continued on its way, and Paul Pry began to put into operation a certain very definite plan he had in mind.

5

Cross-Stitch Killer

There was a drug store across the street, and Paul Pry stepped across to it, purchased a woman's purse, a lip stick, compact, handkerchief, a package of chewing gum. He paid for the purchases with one of the hundred-dollar bills he had received, and thrust the change into the purse. He also folded two more of the hundred-dollar bills and pushed them into the purse. The drug clerk watched him curiously, but said nothing.

Paul Pry walked back across the street to the speakeasy. He rang the bell and a panel slid back.

"About four or five minutes ago," said Paul Pry, "there was a young woman, a brunette, wearing a blue skirt and a small, tight-fitting, blue hat. She got out of a coupe and came in here."

"What about it?" said the frosty voice of the man who regarded Paul Pry with hostile eyes through the wicket in the doorway.

"I've got to see her," said Paul Pry.

"You got a card?"

"No. But I've got to see that young woman."

"You can't see her."

Paul Pry fidgeted. "You see," he said, "she dropped her purse. I picked it up and intended to return it to her. Then I looked inside of it and saw what was in it, and the temptation was too much for me. I started to run away with it. You see, I've got a wife and a couple of kiddies who haven't had anything much to eat for two or three days now. I've been out of work and my savings are completely used up. I had to do anything I could to get by. When I saw the money in this purse, I decided I wouldn't return the purse. Then, after I'd walked half a block, I realized I couldn't steal, so I had to bring it to her."

"All right," said the man, "give me the purse and I'll take it to her."

Paul Pry opened the purse. "Look," he said, "there's almost three hundred dollars in it."

"I'll take it to her," said the man in the doorway.

"Like hell you will," said Paul Pry. "She'll probably give me a five spot, or perhaps a ten, or she might even get generous and give me a twenty. That would mean a lot to me. I couldn't take the purse, but I sure as hell could take a reward."

"If she wants to give you a reward, I'll bring it to you," said the man.

Paul Pry's laugh was mocking and scornful.

The man on the other side of the door seemed undecided.

"You either let me in and I take it to her personally," said Paul Pry, "or she doesn't get it. If you want to keep a customer from getting her purse back, it's all right by me; I've done my duty in trying to return it. If you won't let her have it, I'll put an ad in the paper telling the whole circumstances."

"Look here," said the man who glowered through the opening in the doorway, "this is a high-class restaurant. We put on a floor show, and the young woman who just came in is one of the girls who works in the floor show. Now you've got that purse and it belongs to her. If you try to take it away, I'll call a cop and have you arrested."

Paul Pry sneered. "A fat chance you've got of calling a cop," he said. "I'd raise a commotion and tell the whole cockeyed world that this place was a speakeasy; that I was trying to get in to return the purse and you wouldn't let me in, but started calling a cop. If you're a respectable restaurant why the hell don't you open your door so the public can patronize you?"

The bolts slipped back in the door.

"Oh hell," said the man, "come on in and get it over with. You're just one of those damn pests that show up every so often."

"Where do I find her?" asked Paul Pry.

"The name is Ellen Tracy. She's in one of the dressing rooms up on the second floor. I'll have one of the waiters take you up."

"And want to chisel in on the reward," said Paul Pry. "Not much you don't. I'm on my way right now."

He pushed past the man and ran up the stairs.

There was a telephone at the man's elbow. As Paul Pry was halfway up the stairs he heard the telephone ring, heard the man answer it and then lower his voice to a mere confidential mumble.

Paul Pry would have given much to have heard that conversation, but he had no time to wait. With his sword cane grasped firmly in his hand, he took the stairs two at a time. He walked rapidly across a dance floor, pushed his way through a curtained doorway, walked up a flight of steps. He saw a row of doors, one with the name "Ellen Tracy" painted on it. He tapped with his knuckles.

"Who is it?" called a woman's voice.

"A package for you," said Paul Pry.

The door opened a few inches. A woman's hand and bare arm protruded. "Give it to me," she said.

Paul Pry pushed the door open.

She fell back with a little scream.

She had slipped out of her dress and was attired in underwear, shoes and stockings. There was a costume on a stool beside a dressing table and a kimono draped carelessly over a chair. The young woman made no attempt to pick up the kimono, but stood staring at Paul Pry, apparently entirely unconscious of her apparel.

"Well," she said, "what's the big idea?"

"Listen," said Paul Pry, "I came from him –the man who got you to get that check from the post office. You know what I mean."

Her face was suddenly drained of color, her eyes dark with alarm. "Yes," she said in a low, half-choked voice.

"What did they tell you at the bank?" said Paul Pry. "It's important as hell."

"Mr. Hammond," she said, "said that he would make the check right. He wanted the bank to cash it, but they wouldn't cash a forged check. He said that he'd make the check good. I telephoned a few minutes ago and explained the whole thing. You should have known."

"There's some question about that," Paul Pry said. "You telephoned to the wrong number. Somebody else seems to have got the information. Are you sure you telephoned to the right number?"

There was a puzzled frown on her forehead. She nodded slowly.

"What was the number?" asked Paul Pry.

She fell back from him suddenly, as though he had struck her. Her face was deathly white. She seemed to shrink within herself. "Who . . . who . . . who are you?" she asked in a voice which was shrill with panic.

"I told you who I am," Paul Pry said.

She shook her head slowly. Her eyes were wide and dark. "Get out of here!" she said in a half whisper. "For God's sake get out of here while there's still time!"

Paul Pry took a step toward her. "Listen," he said, "you either know what you're mixed up in or you don't. In any event . . ."

A woman's scream, shrill and high-pitched, interrupted his sentence. The scream seemed to come from one of the adjoining dressing rooms.

Paul Pry stood still, listening, his eyes slitted, his mouth a thin, straight line. The scream rang out again, louder and more insistent.

Paul Pry stared at the woman. "Who's that screaming?" he asked.

She could hardly answer, so great was her terror. Her tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. Her throat seemed paralyzed. At length, she stammered: "It's Thelma . . . that's her room next to mine."

"Thelma?" asked Paul Pry.

She nodded.

"Tell me," said Paul Pry, "was that the girl who drove the coupe that took you to the post office and the bank?"

She nodded once more.

Paul Pry jabbed his finger at her as though he had been stabbing her with a weapon. "You," he said, "stay right there. Don't you make a move. Don't try to go out. Don't let anyone else in. When I come back you let me in. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

Paul jerked the door open.

The scream from the adjoining dressing room sounded once more as Paul Pry jumped through the doorway into the corridor, and flung himself at the door of the next dressing room.

The door was unlocked.

Paul Pry pushed his way into the dressing room, then, at what he saw, kicked the door shut behind him.

The young woman who had given him the name Thelma when he had caught her trying on clothes in the millionaire's apartment, was standing in the far corner of the room. Her waist was torn open at the throat, ripped for its entire length. The brassiere was pulled down from her shoulders. Her hair was in disarray. Her skirt was lying on a chair. Her step-ins were torn in two or three places. She held a gun in her right hand. As Paul Pry kicked the door shut, she screamed again.

Paul Pry stared at her and at the gun.

"O.K., Thelma," he said. "What's the trouble? Quick!"

She swayed toward him. "C-c-c-can't you see?" she said.

"I can see plenty," he told her, looking at the white of the girl's skin, a white which showed angry red places where, apparently, blows had been rained.

"Did you see the man who went out of here?" she asked.

Paul Pry shook his head. He was staring at her with eyes narrowed.

"I c-c-c-can't tell you," she said. "Come over here and let me w-w-w-whisper to you. It was awful!"

Paul Pry moved toward her.

She shivered. "I'm c-c-c-cold," she said. "I'm going to faint. Take off your coat and put it around me. I'm so c-c-c-cold. Put your coat around my shoulders." She swayed toward him.

Paul Pry jumped forward and caught her by the shoulders. He

spun her abruptly, brutally, jerking the gun from her hand as he did so.

She staggered halfway across the small dressing room, dropped to a chair and sat staring at Paul Pry with startled eyes.

"All right," said Paul Pry, "now give me the lowdown and do it quick!"

"How did you know?" she asked.

"It was too raw," he told her. "Give me the lowdown."

"I don't think I could have gone through with it anyway," she said. "But my life depended on it."

"All right," he said, "I think I know the answer, but tell me what it was."

"I saw that you were following us," she said. "I recognized you. I telephoned the information to the party to whom I make my reports. He told me to rush up to my dressing room, pull my clothes off, make it look as though I had been attacked, and scream. When you came in, I was to shoot. He gave me the gun, but he didn't trust me. He only gave me one shell in the gun. I was to fire that one shell when you were so close I couldn't miss. When he heard the shot, he was to come in. I was to swear that you had tried to attack me."

"Then what?" asked Paul Pry.

"That's all," she said, "if the sound of the shot attracted any attention. If it didn't, I wasn't going to figure in it. I wasn't going to have to say anything. He was going to dispose of your body some way; I don't know how. All I had to do was to pack up my things and take a long trip around the world. He was going to give me the tickets and everything."

"And if you didn't do it?" asked Paul Pry.

"Then," she said, "neither one of us was to come out of here alive."

"You know of the murderous activities of this man you're working for?" asked Paul Pry.

She hesitated a moment, then nodded her head. "Yes," she said slowly, "I know now. I didn't until a few minutes ago."

"And," said Paul Pry, "he's here in this restaurant?"

"He owns the place," she said.

Paul Pry flipped open the cylinder of the gun. It was as the young woman had said—there was but one shell in it.

Paul Pry pushed the cylinder back into position. "Let's get out," he said.

She shook her head. "You can't do it," she said. "He's waiting outside, and he's got another man with him. They're going to kill us both unless I go through with what he told me to do."

"Suppose no one from the outside hears the shot?" said Paul Pry. "Then what?"

"Then," she said, "I think . . ."

"Go on," he told her, as her voice trailed away into silence, "tell me what you think."

Her voice came in a whisper. "I think," she said, "he's going to sew up your lips and dump your body somewhere."

She shuddered and trembled as though with a chill.

Paul Pry stood in front of her, staring at her with level, appraising eyes. "Look here, Thelma," he said, "if you're lying to me it's going to mean your life. Tell me the truth. If no one hears the shot, he's going to dispose of my body that way?"

She nodded, then said, after a minute, in a dull, hopeless tone: "But it's no use now. We're both going to die. You don't know him. You don't know how absolutely, unutterably ruthless, how unspeakably cruel . . ."

Paul Pry moved swiftly. He took the dressing table, tilted it to a sharp angle, pulled open one of the drawers, inserted the revolver and pulled the trigger.

The gun gave forth a muffled *boom*.

Paul Pry toppled the dressing table to the floor. It fell with a bang which shook the walls.

Paul Pry, stepping back, tossed the useless gun to the floor, took the razor-keen blade of his sword cane from its scabbard, held himself flat against the wall, just to one side of the door, so that the opening door would serve to conceal him from who entered the room.

There was a period of silence.

Thelma put her head in her hands and started to cry.

Slowly, the knob on the door rattled into motion. The latch clicked; the door opened slowly. Two men entered the room. Paul Pry could hear the sounds of their shuffling feet, but could not see them.

A masculine voice said: "Where is he, Thelma?"

The sobbing girl said nothing, but kept her face in her hands, sobbing hopelessly.

The men moved further into the room. One of them walked toward her.

Paul Pry took a deep breath and kicked the door shut.

Two pairs of startled eyes stared at him. One of the men was the man who had been on guard at the door of the speakeasy. The other was a man Paul Pry had never seen before—a well-dressed man with curly, black hair, eyes that glinted with dark fire. He had a saturnine cast to his countenance, and his face seemed to radiate a sort of hypnotic power.

Both men had guns which dangled from their hands.

The man who had guarded the door of the speakeasy was nearest to Paul Pry. He raised his gun.

Paul Pry lunged forward. The slender blade of his sword cane, appearing hardly stronger than a long darning needle, flicked out like the tongue of a snake. The glittering steel embedded itself in the left side of the man's chest.

The man wilted into lifelessness. Blood spurted along the stained steel of the cane as Paul Pry whipped it out and whirled.

The man with the dark, curly hair fired.

The bullet clipped past Paul Pry's body so close that it caught the folds of his coat, tugging and ripping at the garment as though some invisible hand had suddenly snatched at the cloth.

Paul Pry's slender steel flicked out and down. The razor-keen edge cut the tendons on the back of the man's right hand. The nerveless fingers dropped the gun to the floor.

With an oath, he jumped back, flung his left hand under the folds of his coat, whipped out a long-bladed knife.

Paul Pry lunged once more. The man paried the lunge with his knife. Steel grated on steel.

Paul Pry's light blade was turned aside by the heavy knife. The momentum of Pry's lunge carried him forward. The dark-haired man laughed sardonically as he turned the point of the knife toward Paul Pry's throat.

But Paul Pry managed, by a super-human effort, to catch himself just as he seemed on the point of empaling his throat on the knife. His adversary recognized too late that he had lost the advantage. He thrust outward with the knife, but his left hand

made the thrust awkward and ill-timed. Paul Pry jumped back from the thrust. Once more the point of his sword cane was flickering in front of him, a glittering menace of steel which moved swiftly.

"So," he said, "you know how to fence?"

The dark-haired man held the heavy knife in readiness to parry the next thrust. "Yes," he said, "I know how to fence far better than you, my friend."

"And I suppose," said Paul Pry, "that is the knife which accounted for the men whose lips were sewed together."

"Just a little trade mark of mine," admitted the man with the knife. "When I leave here, your lips and Thelma's lips will be sewed in the same manner. I'll drop your bodies . . ."

Paul Pry moved with bewildering swiftness. The point of his narrow steel blade darted forward.

The man flung the knife into a position to parry the thrust. "Clumsy," he said.

But Paul Pry's wrist deflected the point at just the proper moment to slide the slender steel just inside the blade of the heavy knife.

The dark-haired man had time to register an expression of bewildered consternation. Then Pry's flicking bodkin buried itself in his heart, and his face ceased to show any expression whatever.

6

Fifty Grand

Mugs Magoo stared with wide eyes at Paul Pry as he entered the apartment. "Say something," he pleaded.

Paul Pry smiled, took off his hat and coat.

"What shall I say?"

"Anything," Mugs Magoo said, "just so I can tell that your lips aren't stuck together with cross-stitches."

Paul Pry took a cigarette case from his pocket, took out a cigarette and inspected the end critically. "Well, Mugs," he said, "suppose I smoke? How would that be?"

"That'd be all right," said Mugs. "Where were you last night?"

"Oh, just around doing things," said Paul Pry. "I had a couple of young women I had to see off on a plane."

"Good-looking?" asked Mugs Magoo.

"Well," said Paul Pry, "they had mighty fine figures, and if they hadn't been so badly frightened they'd have been pretty good lookers."

"And than what did you do with the early part of the morning?"

"I had to cash a check," said Paul Pry.

"I thought you cashed that one yesterday."

"I did, Mugs, but you see, there was a misunderstanding about the check that I left in its place, so Mr. Hammond sent another check for twenty-five thousand to the same party at General Delivery."

"And why didn't the party get that one?" asked Mugs Magoo.

Paul Pry sighed. "That," he said, "is rather a long story."

Eva Bentley pushed open the door of the glass compartment where she had been taking down the radio calls. "There's a lot of hot stuff coming in over the radio," she said, "about this cross-stitch murder."

Paul Pry puffed complacently on his cigarette. "What is it?" he said. "Can you tell me what's happening?"

"Yes," she said. "There's a broadcast out for the apprehension of two women. One of them is Ellen Tracy and the other is Thelma Peters. They were employed as entertainers and floor girls in a downtown speakeasy."

Paul Pry's face showed no expression other than a mild curiosity. "Indeed?" he said. "And just what have these two young ladies been doing?"

"The police think," she said, "that they can give valuable information about the cross-stitch murderer. In fact, they think the girls might have been implicated in the murders—perhaps unwillingly."

"And what," asked Paul Pry, with that same expression of polite curiosity in his face, "gives the police that impression?"

"Because," said Eva Bentley, "the police raided the speakeasy on a tip this morning about ten o'clock. They found two bodies in the dressing room which had been occupied by Thelma Peters. The men had evidently fought with a knife and pistol, and there may have been another man present in the room. In fact, the police think there was.

"On one of the bodies the police found a surgeon's needle and some thread of exactly the same kind which was used in making the cross-stitches on the lips of the murder victims. The police started an investigation and are pretty well satisfied the man is the

cross-stitch murderer. They found evidence which tied him up with a wholesale murder plot. It seems that he'd been collecting money from half a dozen different millionaires, threatening to murder them if they gave the police any information whatever. The two people who were killed were those who had given the police information, but the cross-stitch murderer figured that he'd kill a couple of millionaires anyway, in order to get the newspaper notoriety which would strike terror into the hearts of his proposed victims."

"Rather a neat scheme," said Paul Pry. "And, by the way, have the police any trace of the two young ladies?"

"Not yet; they've just broadcast a general description."

Paul Pry looked at his wrist watch. "Doubtless," he said, "by this time, the young ladies are far, far away, which, probably, is just as well. Possibly they were intimidated, by the man for whom they worked, into taking certain isolated steps in connection with a murder campaign, but didn't know just how those steps were connected up at the time."

"Perhaps," said Eva Bentley, staring at Paul Pry curiously. "The police have a description, however, of a young man who entered the speakeasy just about the time when the autopsy surgeon estimates the two men were killed. Would you like to hear that description?"

Paul Pry yawned and shook his head. "No," he said, "I don't think so. Really, Miss Bentley, I'm not particularly interested in the cross-stitch murders any more."

Mugs Magoo stared at him with stupefied wonder for a moment, then suddenly reaching out, he grasped the neck of the whiskey bottle in his left hand, and, disdaining the use of a glass, tilted the bottle to his lips, letting the contents gurgle down his throat.

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